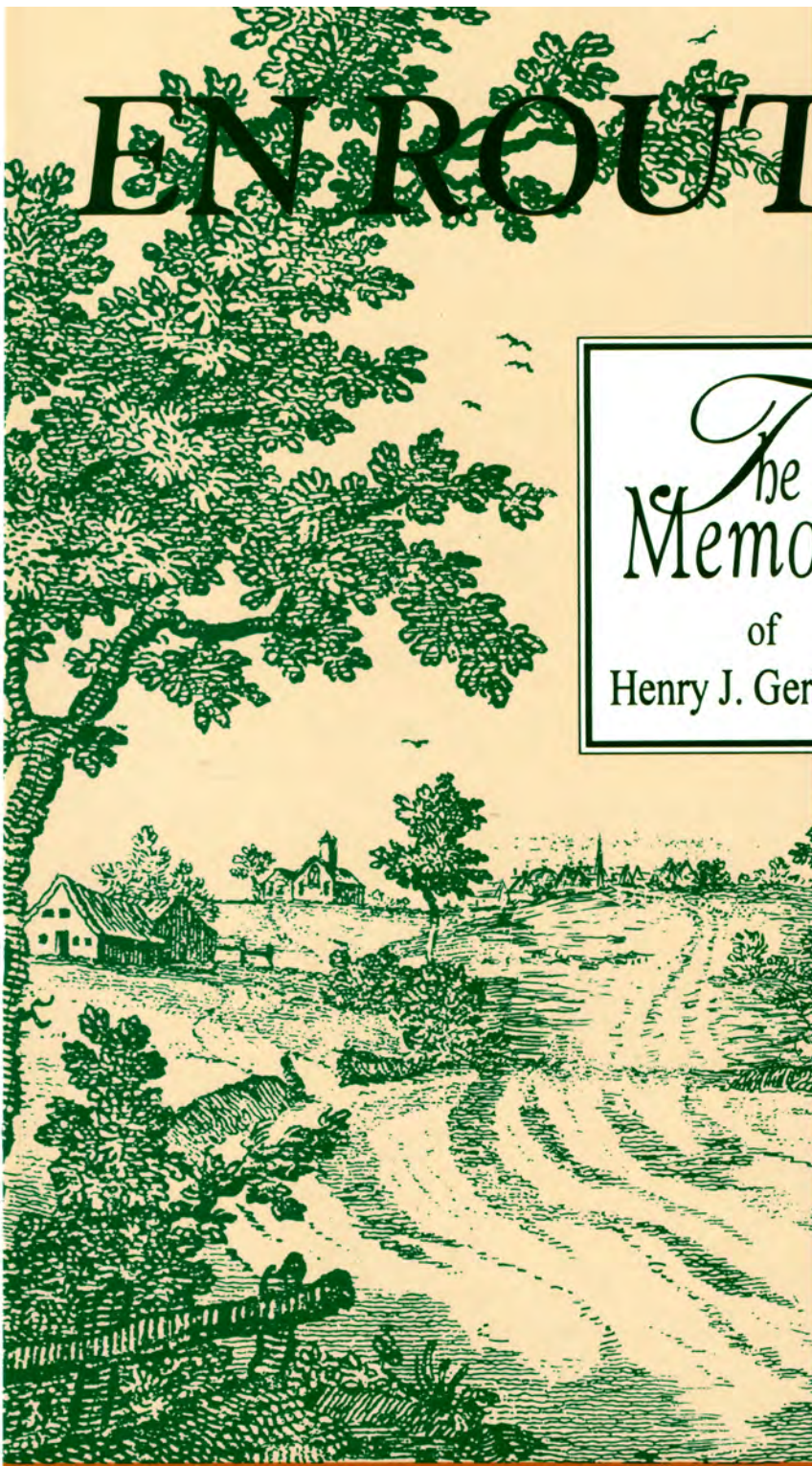


EN ROUTE

The
Memoirs
of
Henry J. Gerbrandt



HINJAWÄAJIS

En Route

Hinjawääjis

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of
Henry J. Gerbrandt

CMBC Publications
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Acknowledgements

When I wrote the history of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba, *Adventure in Faith*, I took great pains to research and footnote the facts accurately. How well I achieved that goal must be left to the judgement of readers. This book is different. It is an account of my memories.

Memories are based on experiences which are shared from a very personal, subjective perspective. Naturally, one person's memories should never deny or ignore those of others who may have experienced or perceived the same events very differently. Their memories can supplement, modify or even challenge mine. Such divergent remembering creates interest. It gives us the past not as recorded minutes but as human experiences which become our mutual history.

In this collection of memories I have tried to be accurate and historically truthful. I have refreshed my memory through extensive reading of numerous minutes, research articles, journals, church records and books.

I am deeply indebted to my wife Susan who spent many hours reading my chapters, challenging, correcting and adding new information. I owe much to her for the constant support and encouragement, especially when my interest lagged during the crisis with my eyes.

Our son Gerald spent much time on the preparation of the manuscript. He critiqued and carefully revised the material and made computer printouts for further reading and evaluation. Our daughters Elaine, Norma and Linda added their questions and criticism and, on behalf of the family, Elaine wrote the Preface.

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I am indebted to Margaret Franz, editor for the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, for editing the manuscript and preparing camera-ready copy for the printers. Gerald Loewen, artist, designed the cover art work. I am happy that Lawrence Klippenstein, my long-time friend and colleague, wrote the Foreword.

I now submit to readers what I have experienced *hinjawäajis*—en route—with Susan, family, friends and fellow travellers. I trust it will evoke nostalgia for some, inspire others to think through and record their stories and, finally, bring joy and laughter to others.

My prayer is that our grandchildren may discover just a little more about their grandparents—their journey through life, their joys and sorrows, their victories and defeats and, through it all, their faith. I trust this collection of memories may be a blessing to some and a challenge to others.

Henry J. Gerbrandt
Winnipeg, Manitoba
April 1994

Preface

The Mennonite film, “And When They Shall Ask,” follows the Old Testament tradition of responding to your children’s questions about life and faith with “the story.” When we asked Dad why there was such urgency to write this book his answer simply was, “To tell the story. To let the grandchildren know who we are.”

And so it has. Jeremy (the oldest grandchild) says the meaning of this story for him is that “it places me somewhere—this is my story too.” For the younger grandchildren the stories will be, for some time yet, just interesting anecdotes about their grandparents. To us adult children the telling of this story reaches into our own past and beyond, bringing new understandings and bridging us solidly into the future. Most of the specific incidents in this book were not factually new information to us. What was startlingly different was the emotional context and impact of these events on Dad’s life and work. Gerbrandt stoicism was alive and well in our home and, of course, children seldom see and feel the full drama of their parents’ lives.

So we never realized the gut-wrenching trauma of a 14-year-old boy watching his mother die and his childhood slipping away. We never knew about the aching, black despair of a young man in his lonely search for Truth in a world he eventually would leave behind. Nor did we know about the humiliation of failure, betrayal and devastating losses of the Mexico experience. We never knew that the physical headaches of the Elkhart sabbatical were again the struggle to let go of the oppressions of the past, to affirm his calling and move forward in faith. But then he was a private man, a public figure, and we were children

What we did know about as children was his deep love for the prairie landscape, his respect for all living creatures (“You didn’t have to kill that spider”) and his commitment to sharing personal resources (“Why have two jackets when someone has none?”) And the Church: well, it wasn’t an important *part* of life, it *was* Life—we always knew that.

All of us remarked on some new intriguing features to the story. Dad's early life in largely non Mennonite-influenced Lowe Farm set a stage for his later interest in inter-faith dialogue and a teaching of respect for beliefs beyond Southern Manitoba Mennonite traditions. Leaving the confines of World War II Mennonitism to consider a United Church post had deep roots. Dad's questioning the beliefs and traditions of his boyhood community gave us the message that visioning and risking change were possible. Although he may not always agree with his children's theology or view of the church, his "leap of faith" from the generations of old-world Mennonitism to a contemporary Mennonite faith will certainly parallel our lifetime journeys.

I believe these stories are Dad's resolution and affirmation of his life. In reviewing his life's learnings, relationships and work, he holds them as his own—a life spent in service and in search. His life's focus was always people, not theology; relationships, not institutions.

The title *En Route* is perhaps too linear a concept to reflect the profound sense of coming home which Dad experienced in the July 1993 100th anniversary celebration with the Sommerfelder Church community. He recalled the essence of a simple boyhood faith as being adequate for a complex world, yet affirming the changes he sought.

We were sorry that Mom's story was not told as a separate one. However, it was her wish to be included alongside Dad's story, saying this was a story they shared. In truth Mom made many independent contributions to church and community. She was the first woman missionary to be ordained in the Bergthaler Church. Her continuing pastoral and administrative functions can be acknowledged in their own right. Dad's church, conference and Bible school work meant Mom was left with the daunting task of raising four children virtually on her own. The end of the Mexico assignment in 1948 was a deep grief to her both in terms of the death of her life's calling, also in the long-term struggle to redefine her place in a world she didn't choose.

Although we continue lively discussions about present-day feminism, Mom has deeply influenced our sense of women taking their rightful and responsible place in the church and the world.

So what does it all mean? It is a story, our story, and one that will continue to enrich us and instruct us. Thank you, Dad and Mom.

Elaine Gerbrandt Bergen
On behalf of Gerald, Norma and Linda
Easter 1994

Foreword

Writing with meaning about one's life and work demands the ability to recall and reflect. Anyone who takes on this task must also come to it with a sense of self-worth and with considerable energy and a healthy measure of courage. The writer of this book has all these qualities and is a good storyteller as well.

Readers of this account will learn to know someone with varied experiences living in a many-faceted community on local, national and international levels. Lives begin in a small circle. However, the experiences highlighted in this story eventually overflowed the bounds of a small community, Lowe Farm and environs, to include the new challenges of Altona, Toronto, Mexico, Germany—an expanding world indeed. Exciting as this odyssey may sound, it is not without its stresses and strains. Sometimes the journey is slow; at other times it speeds along almost too quickly. And as the writer paused—as he surely did—at times he must have wondered, “Did all that really happen to me? How can it be?”

The home and family of the author obviously helped to form the core of his personhood and the way he would look at everything from early childhood to his retiring years. One of the inimitable and significant features of this very personal story is the view one gets of intimate family interaction. Readers will share a growing awareness of the way in which one's home life permanently leaves its imprint on later years.

This story takes its audience far beyond a simple inward look. One learns much about the larger regions of southern Manitoba Mennonite life as it existed just after the turn of the century and several decades following. The author presents illustrations of outside religious influences which changed the Mennonite landscape as it evolved after the 1870s when 7,000 Ukrainian Mennonites arrived on Manitoba soil.

The life we read about here is a highly nuanced example of how those forces made a decisive difference to someone who was keenly receptive to religio-spiritual impulses and initiatives around him.

Placed in the context of an equally sensitive responsiveness to other aspects of life—economic, social, political—these forces had a decided impact on the call to missionary work and ministries of various kinds in subsequent decades.

Autobiography is a form of history. Yet here one finds much history that could be called non-personal, forming the framework for a testimony of God's faithfulness. Henry told the story of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba in another book, *Adventure in Faith*. It is a title that fits this account also. The early "failed" ventures of Mennonite Pioneer Mission in Mexico can now be viewed from a broader perspective. They can be understood more clearly as the sacrificial pioneering beachheads of training in ministry which they were for the author and others working with him. The strains and stresses of maturing in one's early years may fit in here too.

Conference life is a major theme in this story. One senses it became a way of life in itself. Here is the material which explains why, for many, Henry became Mr. Conference of Mennonites in Canada in his later years. That should not obscure the almost unbelievable efforts he expended to be a good teacher and a conscientious and helpful pastor besides. Three or four demanding but highly fruitful careers all wrapped up in one . . . the story speaks dramatically about the way in which that sort of thing can happen (without burnout!) in real life.

To say that this self-portrait is not "triumphalist" in the least is to make an understatement. Certainly this telling of it affirms the New Testament Pauline stance of striving but not yet arriving; that is, that one must focus less on achievements and more on the goal "which is in Christ Jesus." Always there are the things which remain unfinished and incomplete, the projects which ended up being something else than one had planned. Those disappointments sometimes remain as long as the earthly pilgrimage itself.

Some may wonder whether one ought to write a history of oneself, as it were. Indeed not everyone will feel called to try. But the God of a people's history surely is also the God of a personal story. God is revealed in one level of life as much as in the other. This book demonstrates that a person is justified in thinking—and writing—about both.

Lawrence Klippenstein
Historian-Archivist, Mennonite Heritage Centre
Winnipeg, Manitoba



Susan and Henry J. Gerbrandt

1

Beginnings in Lowe Farm

It was a beautiful Monday morning in July 1927. White, fluffy cumulous clouds drifted lazily in from the northwest. The world around me was a stunning symphony of chirping blue jays, meadow-larks, bobolinks, kingbirds, finches and a host of other birds nesting in the reeds, bulrushes and meadows along the winding prairie road. I drank in the fragrant atmosphere of this mysterious, enchanting, untamed wilderness and became lost in aimless reverie. As I blended into the fascinating, bewitching, unspoiled virgin prairie, I was completely oblivious to my work of driving a team of horses that lazily followed the hayrack ahead of me driven by my Father. He was towing a grass mower, I a wide hay rake.

We were on our way to a 10-acre plot of virgin prairie grass which Father had rented to supplement the winter feed for our livestock. This small plot of grassland was part of a vast stretch of open, uncultivated prairie, west and north of Lowe Farm, Manitoba. At one time it had been bought or homesteaded by American speculators. But they thought it was too swampy for farming. It was totally treeless. After World War I some of this land had been given to returning veterans who also found this northern wilderness impossible to tame. Consequently, most of this apparent wasteland had never been broken by a plough.

A sudden jolt brought me out of my daydreaming. I had not noticed that my horses also hadn't been paying attention and had moved too close to the right while crossing a new dike bridge. The drainage dike had been built to make this wasteland productive. The right wheel of my rake had caught the bridge railing, resulting in a broken tongue.

When Father looked back, he saw my predicament and came back to survey the damage. Needless to say he was very upset. Then came the verdict. I deserved a spanking for being so absent from my work. But wisely he decided that spanking me would not fix the rake. Instead I had to run the four-and-a-half miles back home to fetch a piece of lumber two inches by four inches by four feet long, a brace and bit and some bolts and washers. Then I was to take the family car and be back as soon as possible. I knew what Father would be doing during my absence: enjoying the wild prairie.

It seems as if I ran all the way. I had escaped a spanking. Now I wanted to appease my own feelings of guilt as well as please my Father. But perhaps I was even more motivated as I already saw myself proudly driving that all-black Ford which had been new in 1920 and had been looked after meticulously during its annual 2,000 miles of summer driving. It was only used on good roads and was safely stored on blocks for the long winter months. Mother, the constant appeaser, naturally felt very sorry for me. She quickly helped me get the necessary supplies, fed me and sent me back to my waiting Father.

Soon I found myself driving through the gorgeous countryside on the periphery of that northern Mennonite settlement. This world of mine was so free, so adorably beautiful, yet so naively innocent. It did not occur to me that our family was not rich, that our barn-house, old-Dutch-style residence was rather primitive, that many of our neighbours and friends worked more land than we did. It did not bother me that some of them drove Hopmobiles, Desotos, McGlaughlins and that Father's best friend drove a new, low, sleek Star that only whispered when it entered our yard.

As I drove to my waiting Father I was totally oblivious to the meaning of Mennonite migrations and designated reserves. It did not matter to me that my parents, not married at the time of moving, my grandparents and all our neighbours had left the reserves and that a number of our relatives, acquaintances and neighbours had even intentionally moved away from church and reserve influences and controls. The more sedate and pious people of the reserve regions considered our community to be rather godless. This was especially true of the new, bustling, frontier town of Lowe Farm, where we touched base with former "Yankees" and other non-Mennonite, English-speaking people. I was only vaguely aware that the French people, just to the east, played a protective role for us when the Manitoba government enforced English schools on its non-English citizens.

Through the weekly papers which Father kept I learned much about the world beyond our district. We knew about John A. MacDonald and his contribution to Canada. Some of our school teachers, though all Mennonites, had instilled in us a strong sense of belonging. The focus at a recent picnic in Lowe Farm had been the Diamond Jubilee, Canada's 60th birthday since Confederation. With patriotic passion a Lowe Farm high school student, Francis Hoffman, had recited the poem "John A. MacDonald." At the same time I also was an admirer of Louis Riel and felt he should not have been executed for his part in trying to protect his people. I did not know that MacDonald and his rigid Conservative party were responsible.

The Lowe Farm Community

At the turn of the century Lowe Farm was an exciting, growing community. English settlers from Ontario and Americans, often called "Yankees," gave it a decided non-Mennonite flavour. The Lowe Farm area, and to a lesser degree the other districts, earlier had been taken up as homesteads or bought by speculators. Much of this land had been secured by three entrepreneurial government people from Ottawa: Lowe, Rose and Hope. Rose bought or procured land in the Rosefarm area. That is how the name was registered. Records show that in 1897 John Lowe had 8,320 acres of land to his name. In view of the fact that he handled the Mennonite migration and helped designate the land for their reserves,* it is rather interesting that he managed to get that much land next to the reserves and was ready to sell to the Mennonites when they expanded beyond the reserves. Today he might be charged with conflict of interest. Before the turn of the century, the honest John A. MacDonald was saved that kind of harassment.

All the reserve lands had been developed before the turn of the century. Those who wanted to expand or find land for their sons had to go beyond the reserve. That brought hungry land buyers like Grandfather into the Lowe Farm region. It seems that is what land speculators had been waiting for. The price of farm land started to rise

* In 1873 the Federal Government through its Deputy Minister of Agriculture, John Lowe, designated two areas in Manitoba specifically for Mennonite settlement. There were eight townships (184,320 acres) in the Steinbach region, 17 townships (396,680 acres) in the Altona to Morden region. The latter allotment was only finalized in 1876. The region east of the Red River was called the East Reserve, the area west of the Red was the West Reserve.

as American and English landowners began selling to the Mennonites. Some owners like John Lowe, R. Reid, Alex McLaren, Wm. McIntyre and Bob McGinnes moved away. Others, with more Germanic ancestry like the Crouches, Bert Oltman, Andersons and Bill Dutchman managed to hang on and live side by side with the Mennonites.

My earliest recollections relate more to the Jewish community than to the English people. I remember two Jewish merchants, Moses Altman and Moses Rosner. The Rosner family of eight boys fit right into the community. They spoke a good Low German and were very religious. When we visited our grandparents, aunts and uncles and played with our cousins on the town streets, we never found it odd to have the Rosner boys be part of the gang. Not only were they religious in their Jewish faith, they were also liberal in their philanthropic relationships to us Gentiles.

Rosners always offered credit in their store and never forcibly collected accounts. When they left Lowe Farm they had the reputation that they never took possession of collateral offered on overdue accounts. When the Lowe Farm Bergthaler church was built, the Rosners were heavy contributors. Charley Rosner claimed they had contributed more toward that new building than any one of its faithful members. His technique was rather ingenious. Any customer who owed Rosners money was asked to go to the church building site and help with the construction. Charley claimed that on some days only his customers were working on the church. The arrangement made all sides happy. The Bergthaler people got their church built, the Sommerfelder people had their debts removed, and the Rosners endeared themselves to more people.

At Mennonite funerals the Rosners sang Gospel songs or Mennonite chorales along with everyone else. Lowe Farm probably had no singer that could do the bass in "My Hope Is Built" as well as Charley Rosner. Years later when I attended the funeral service for Charley, the rabbi in the Shaarey Zedek Synagogue in Winnipeg said, "Here is a man who spent all his life among a people of a different faith, but was never touched by them." There I sat, wearing my black Jewish skullcap and lost in my nostalgic past.

Through my mind came a flashback of dear Charley in our Lowe Farm church at my Uncle Cornelius' funeral, singing lustily in his beautiful bass, "My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, But wholly lean on Jesus' name." I will allow a gracious God to sort out our limited

understanding. At the funeral I felt sorry for the unenlightened rabbi, not for the deceased Charley.

The Altmans, the other Jewish family, were more aloof. I best remember Hymie, their son, who always seemed to be studying at some university, and Florence, their daughter, who seemed to us so beautiful and spoiled. Yet she too wanted to mix with the rest of the Lowe Farm kids. One summer my Aunt Tina Dyck was making *Rollkuchen*. As was frequently the case, Florence was in the house giving attention to Aunt Tina's handicapped son. Florence asked for some *Rollkuchen*. Aunt Tina knew that lard-fried foods were not to be part of Florence's diet. She sent her to her mother to ask for permission. Soon Florence was back cheerfully informing Aunt Tina that her mother didn't mind. She ate, and Aunt Tina wisely never checked with Florence's mother.

By the mid-1920s Lowe Farm had John Deere, McCormick Deering, Case and Massey Harris agencies. John Schroeder, the McCormick agent, also sold Ford cars and tractors. I don't remember who sold the Hart Parr and Minneapolis Moline tractors. I do remember a train pulling into Lowe Farm with a flatcar full of new Hart Parrs. As in all rural communities, Lowe Farm had a thriving blacksmith shop. There was also a full-sized harness-racing track. Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike owned beautiful pacers.

Lowe Farm also had a hardball team. My maternal grandfather was an avid supporter and got rather vocal in cheering for his home team. One of the Funk boys, Grandfather's neighbours, came to be known as Mr. Baseball, a name he kept to the end of his life, even years later in Winnipeg. Father took us to watch baseball and I still vividly recall how beautiful it looked to see those men hit the ball so far.

A company of Lowe Farm Mennonite business people come to mind. There was John Martens the blacksmith. He was a very honest man, usually seen in greasy pants and jacket, but he was considered extremely slow. Some said that it took him ten minutes to return a "Good Morning" greeting.

There was Henry Dyck, the grain buyer for Patterson elevators, whose unique way of starting his one-cylinder diesel motor intrigued every country boy. The flywheel was higher than any man and had long spokes. Henry would insert a match into a small projection that went into the cylinder head. Then he crawled up on the flywheel to push the piston against compression. With his free hand he struck the projection which lit the match in the cylinder chamber and slowly the

engine began to puff into life. He also was a good story teller but he had to stop talking when he cranked up the grain wagons to unload the grain.

John Wiens, the auctioneer and farmer, was a spirited talker even when not auctioning off farm machinery. John Schroeder, the McCormick dealer, was colourful both in business and when he spoke at the *Jugendverein** in the town school. His language was spiced with words that Mother never permitted us to use. He seemed to have other problems as well. He struggled against alcohol all his life until years later when he lived in the Altona Ebenezer Home. It seems he remained the defeated Christian who faithfully asked God for forgiveness.

Then there was Diedrich Heppner, Jacob Heppner's son, who married Susan Loewen, his relentless boss in the home. He was the politician, farmer and businessman who owned most of Lowe Farm and its inhabitants. Whoever did not work for him at least owed him money for lots they had purchased from him to build their homes. Unsuccessfully he tried to get into the Manitoba Legislature. It was said that his wife always voted against the candidates he sponsored. Diedrich Heppner was a powerful churchman who, years later, helped the Bergthaler Mennonite Church extract itself from the aftereffects of the *Waisenamt* debacle.** He seldom went to church, claiming he had to keep his service station open to sell gasoline to the better churchgoing Christians. Most Lowe Farm men at one time worked in Diedrich Heppner's huge barn or on municipal projects in which Heppner was involved as reeve of the municipality.

Just south of town was Bert Oltman, the bachelor "Yankee" who drove the best Clydes in the community and smoked the longest cigars. There is a story about some young men, not even church members, who found themselves sitting in the pew ahead of Bert Oltman in the Bergthaler Church during some kind of musical event. Intentionally they released some intestinal gas and turned around quickly to stare at Bert. Others also turned and stared at this unsaintly worshipper. Naturally he left the church. Later the men crudely said, "That will

* The *Jugendverein*, or Christian Endeavour as it was later called in some churches, was a Sunday evening service largely planned and led by lay people in the church.

** The *Waisenamt* (Orphan Trust Fund) was a limited trust company brought to Manitoba in the 1870s from Ukraine. Originally it was founded to protect inheritance lands and funds of widows and orphans. It developed into a kind of credit union. When it went bankrupt during the Great Depression of the 1930s, considerable financial and property losses were incurred.

teach him that he doesn't belong in a Mennonite church!" Then there was John Groening, the breeder and driver of horses for harness racing, who was also a baseball player.

Lowe Farm was not a very religious community. Located on the edge of the growing Mennonite settlements, it was populated primarily by non-Mennonites. Although it had thriving businesses, implement and car agencies, a track for harness racing, a hardball team, a theatre and a dance hall, it had neither a church congregation nor a building. A Baptist minister from the community south of town conducted occasional German services in the school. Rev. and Mrs. Ridd of the Methodist Church in Morris, ten miles to the east, started a Sunday School, possibly before the turn of the century. Two women, both by the name of McLaren, taught English classes. At the turn of the century, H. H. Ewert, the principal at Mennonite Collegiate Institute, helped a local woman, Marie Heppner, start a German class in conjunction with the English classes.

The established Mennonite churches of that era harboured a strong aversion to placing Mennonite congregations and worship centres in towns. Some members of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church had held occasional worship services in Lowe Farm already since around the turn of the century, but they had to wait until 1928 for their own house of worship in town. It appears that people from the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church, the most predominant Mennonite group in the area, first projected a church building for the town. Tradition has it that the lumber had already been delivered to their chosen site. Then the central church from the reserve area made its decision that the church should be built two miles south and one mile west of Lowe Farm. Apparently, Grandfather Gerbrandt was a prime mover and volunteer in the construction of the church building.

In light of the kind of people who made up the Lowe Farm community, with two-thirds of English descent, and the fear which Mennonite elders and leaders harboured of all things English, it is understandable why the Sommerfelder leadership decided to place the church building in a district like Kronsweide that was already predominantly Mennonite. At the same time Mennonites missed the opportunity of placing their kind of witness into a community that was largely unchurched. At the turn of the century they thought more of self-preservation than of outreach. Furthermore, there probably wasn't a minister except Mr. Ewert who could have preached an English sermon.

This was Lowe Farm, the town and territory I first called home.

Mother and Her Family

My maternal grandparents, Johann and Maria Penner, were born in Ukraine, then migrated to the East Reserve of Manitoba with their respective parents. In approximately 1880 they both moved to the Heuboden district (called Rome at the time) southeast of Plum Coulee where they were married. Like all young married couples of the day, they wanted to farm. But because land was too expensive in the reserve area, in 1898 they purchased or rented land northeast of Lowe Farm. Whether Grandfather's interest in farming waned, or whether his alcohol problem became too severe, after some years he gave up farming and, in 1904, moved into the town of Lowe Farm. When I got to know them they lived in the northwest corner of town and were considered quite poor.

After the move to town he tried different occupations. He became a cattle broker and bought and sold cattle by the carload. His cattle buying trips even took him to Jarko, Saskatchewan, and to the Chaplin district where he bought from an acquaintance, Jacob Banman. He shipped his cattle to Winnipeg or butchered them and sold meat in town. In his later years, 1920 to 1936, he worked as a bridge builder for the Ministry of Public Works of Manitoba. That was during the dike building era when vast lowlands were drained. Grandfather built many bridges, some rather large ones. Although he had never formally studied engineering, he read complex specifications prepared by professionals. Stories about Grandfather's strength grew to legendary proportion. Folklore has it that he would lift huge 15-inch by 3-inch by 16-foot planks one-third from one end, then have two of his employees lift the other end—and he wouldn't even notice if one of the employees put his own weight on the plank!

When he was already older Grandfather bought a car and learned to drive. At first he had some difficulty bringing the car to a complete stop. I remember preparing for his first visit to our place. The baby carriage and the play wagon had to be moved out of his way. Smaller children were carefully guarded. He made several turns on the yard, yet couldn't get that contraption to stop! Finally he stopped in front of a tree which kept it from moving.

Probably because of Grandfather's strong personality, Grandmother somehow never became prominent in my memory. She was known for her friendliness and kindness. Generations before it was Mennonite custom to have morning and afternoon coffees, Grand-

mother would serve coffee whenever someone came to her home. Her black, heavy cast-iron coffee pot was always on the jet black kitchen stove. She just added coffee and water and kept the brew ready from morning until night. Mother always warned us not to drink coffee at Grandmother's. She told us it was poisonous.

Uncle Abram Klassen tells a story about Grandmother. She and Grandfather had had a serious fight, so serious that several of the daughters thought it best to remove Grandmother from the home for a time. A few hours later she said, "It is *Faspa* * time, and Grandfather will be waiting." Immediately she walked home.

Grandmother loved all her grandchildren and we felt good to be with her. Although I cannot recall any special conversations with her, one experience from June 1930 stands out. I was 14 and had completed the eighth grade at Kronsweide school. At that time grade 8 pupils had to write departmental examinations. Mother was very proud of my education and wanted the best for me. Each day I was given the family car to drive to Lowe Farm for the exams. Arrangements were made for me to eat lunch at Grandmother's. She went out of her way to cook special meals. What bothered me was that she expected me to take a nap at noon. Fourteen-year-old boys simply cannot sleep at noon when the rest of the group is playing baseball.

My maternal grandparents seldom went to church. In fact, neither did most of their children. Because of his drinking problem, Grandfather's fellow Sommerfelder Mennonite Church members looked down on him and shunned him. Yet on some special occasions, such as the baptisms of their younger daughters, they were in church. I recall one particular time when they came on the wagon which Grandfather used at his bridge construction site during the week. It was pulled by two huge work horses which were so heavy they couldn't even trot. The wagon with its feed trough, water barrels and heavy tools attached to the sides presented a unique sight among the cars and top-buggies on the church yard. I remember that I simply could not tell my companions, "Those are my grandparents." On his death bed, at the age of 74, Grandfather confessed that he had held to his faith in God throughout life. Many times when he was alone under one of his bridges, he had fallen on his knees to ask God for forgiveness. On his death bed he received the assurance of that forgiveness.

* *Faspa* was a traditional Mennonite meal. It usually consisted of bread, butter, jam and coffee and was served halfway between the early noon meal and the late supper.

Mother was the third daughter in a family that grew to have seven daughters and three sons. Only Mother and her oldest sister Maria, with her husband Henry Groening, became actively involved in farming in Manitoba. Mother's sister Agatha had married a farmer in Herbert but I never saw their operation. It seemed to us that their farming remained rather low-key. Funk was probably more interested in discussions, especially on topics related to eschatology. Nettie, another sister, married a farmer but as the result of repeated floods north of Lowe Farm, her husband George Nickel gave up farming and began working on various farms and in housing construction from which he appeared to make a good living. Katherine married a labourer who first worked as a drayman and later in Rosner's store. Margaretha's husband John Funk managed a grain elevator. Sarah's husband Abram Klassen, who struggled for many years with a lung ailment, worked in various construction projects in Winnipeg. Folklore has it that, after doctors had given up on him, his mother-in-law cured him with camomile tea. Anna, Mother's youngest sister, looked after her parents, then married her sister's widower, Henry Funk.

Mother's youngest brother Jacob followed in his father's footsteps and expanded grandfather's bridge construction work. Two of his sons are still in the business. Her brother Henry spent most of his life working for the Canadian National Railway (CNR). His last project was helping to develop and build the Symington Yards in Winnipeg. John, Mother's oldest brother, died in his late teens during the 1918-20 flu epidemic. One legend has him, along with his horse and buggy, hiding on our farmyard because he was to be recruited for military service.

We children enjoyed our maternal aunts, uncles and their families. The Groenings came most often and we had many pleasant experiences with their children. The Lowe Farm cousins, except for the Nickels, did not visit us often. We did much of our playing with them on the Lowe Farm streets together with other children. Some of the aunts came only when Mother's huge garden was ready with fresh produce. I can still see the buggies or cars leave the yard loaded with fresh cucumbers, beets, carrots, cabbage and rhubarb. Sometimes we wondered why they didn't have gardens of their own. Their soil was as fertile as ours and Mr. Heppner provided space to Lowe Farm people to make gardens on his fields adjacent to the village.

My mother, *Helena*, was born on February 20, 1889, in the Heuboden district. She spent her first nine years on the farm which

Grandfather was trying to develop. Around the turn of the century most children of Sommerfelder parents were sent to church-run schools. Aunt Sarah maintains that Mother and the other sisters occasionally did attend the Bergthaler Church *Jugendverein* conducted in the Lowe Farm school. Sommerfelder church records show that Mother was baptized in the Kronsweide Sommerfelder Church on May 25, 1907. One of the older former residents of Lowe Farm, Tien Reimer Friesen, claims her father helped the Penner girls go to the Sommerfelder Church southwest of town. That may be true, although Grandfather occasionally did take his work horses and wagon to go to church.

Stories about Mother's later childhood years are like fairy tales. When her parents moved to the Lowe Farm area she went to live with her grandparents, the Heinrich Friesens. Folklore suggests she was beautiful, hardworking and of good character. She helped with the many chores on the Friesen farm. When she was old enough to work, she went to town and worked for various Lowe Farm families. Henry Reimer, farmer and businessman, proudly declared, "She raised me and made me what I am." Mrs. Hiebert, the former Marie Heppner, claimed Mother lived with her parents, the Jacob Heppners. Mother herself talked about her experiences at the "Yankee" farm, the Crouches, just west of Lowe Farm. There she learned to bake her prize pumpkin pies.

That was the era when square dances were held in barns. Although the Sommerfelder Church officially frowned on those youth activities, it offered no alternative. According to Mother's brother Henry, she attended those dances. From Father's friend, Peter P. Rempel, comes a story via his daughters that Helena was quite active on the dance floor. Reportedly Rempel told his friend Jacob Gerbrandt that this Helena Penner was worth meeting. He pointed her out to Jacob through a knothole in the wall. In his own memoirs Father confessed that he was still following his own sinful pleasures when God directed him to his future wife. Somewhat ruefully he also admitted that he could have had other women, more wealthy than Helena, but she was the one God had chosen for him.

Father and His Family

Grandfather Jacob Gerbrandt was born to Johann and Anna Gerbrandt on April 10, 1853, in the Bergthal Colony in southern Russia. He married Sarah (Hoepfner) Doerksen of the same colony. Sarah

came from a long line of Hoepplers who traced their roots back to Anton Hoeppler, brother to the deputy Jacob Hoeppler who spied out land in Russia for the Prussian Mennonites. Jacob and Sarah came to Manitoba in 1875 with their respective parents. Although they came from the same colony, attended the same church and were baptized by the same bishop, it is not known whether they knew each other well.

In 1876, barely a year after her arrival in Canada, Sarah married Jacob Doerksen, a personal friend of Jacob Gerbrandt. They had two children, Getruda and Sara. Suddenly in 1879 tragedy struck. Jacob Doerksen, one of his brothers and their friend Jacob Gerbrandt joined many others to stake out new homesteads in the West Reserve. It seems the government was trying to make amends after having settled those honest, hardworking homesteaders on poor land in some areas of the East Reserve. All three began ploughing their new land for next year's crop. On their way back they came to the swollen Rat River. Contrary to the advice of some Indians they tried to ford the river. When Jacob Doerksen's oxen got tangled up in their harnesses, his brother jumped into the water to help. Seeing they were in serious trouble, Jacob Gerbrandt also jumped in but could not help them. Both Doerksen brothers drowned.

Nothing is known of Grandfather Gerbrandt prior to his homesteading and his marriage to Sarah Doerksen less than four months after the tragic death of her husband. After the wedding the young, somewhat sad couple, with their two young daughters, settled on the homestead in Lichtfelde southwest of Altona. Grandmother never really shook off her deep melancholy nature.

As circumstances demanded at the time, the new homesteaders lived very frugally. Land had to be broken, a residence established and food produced. Their first residence was the traditional Russian *semilin*. A hole three feet deep was excavated. Sods from the virgin soil were used to build a wall several feet high. Over this came a ceiling of logs and more prairie sods. Folklore has it that our grandparents lived in one *semilin* with a certain Peters couple that first winter. Fourteen months after their marriage, daughter Anna was born. She lived five years. Nine months after Anna's birth, Peter was born. The family claims they still lived with another couple and that the two babies had to share the same crib.

Grandfather Gerbrandt seems to have been somewhat adventurous. Eighteen years after filing his first homestead he sold all his holdings and struck out once more. He bought half a section of land from a

certain Joseph Hauksworth, three-and-a-half miles southwest of Lowe Farm. A Mr. Flannigan had homesteaded the one quarter in 1879. He then sold it to Elizabeth Short from whom Joseph Hauksworth purchased it in 1883.

Father recalled vividly that first trip into the unknown wild north. The drainage ditches north and west of Rosenfeld had not yet been built. Grandfather and he made their way through deep water and swampy terrain inhabited by myriads of birds and waterfowl and, on higher elevations, by deer and other wild life. Often the bulrushes had been higher than their horses. Onward they pressed until they came to higher ground that later became the districts of Bloomfield, Grossweide, Rosefarm, Kronsweide and Steinfeld.

Farther north of these yet undeveloped districts was the bustling, frontier village of Lowe Farm. That region with its swampy areas, heavy clay soil, treeless landscape and extreme winter conditions had been too discouraging for farmers from the more friendly Ontario or the United States. But for people like Grandfather it was ideal. His half section had been broken and had several buildings. Grandfather appears to have been rather successful and gradually increased his holdings to a full section, although he obtained titles only to two-and-a-quarter quarters. He continued farming for 19 more years, then sold out and moved to Altona to live like a retired gentleman.

To us Grandfather was a picture-book grandfather during his years in Altona from 1917 to 1932. Our grandparents, their meticulous black top-buggy and their brown mare Liz were known to all grandchildren. Their periodic pilgrimages to visit their children and grandchildren were considered very sacred. It seemed we knew when to expect them. We practically drew them in with our constant gaze into the southeast. Grandfather, with his flowing snow-white hair, always appeared to be the same age, and always strong and firm. With little effort he could place one foot on a step of the wagon and, while hauling oats from the threshing machine to the yard, swing himself onto the box.

Although my grandparents were not rich, they lived comfortably. Two of their daughters, Aunt Anna and Aunt Susanna, lived at home and looked after most of the yard work. They milked the cow that enjoyed a five-acre pasture next to their yard north of town. That pasture, with a creek at the far end, provided ample space for grandchildren to play. Grandfather lived like a country gentleman—that is, until 1927, when Grandmother died, and 1930, when he lost his money through the *Waisenamt* debacle.

Grandmother was a very reserved quiet woman, usually immaculately dressed in black. She was known for her love of flowers. Her own flower garden was the envy of Altona. With her two daughters doing the house and yard work, Grandmother had time for her floral pursuits. One granddaughter, Helena Gerbrandt Dueck, remembers picking strawberries with her on the virgin prairie road allowances in the Kronsweide district. Yet a certain reserve kept some grandchildren from relating intimately to Grandmother. To them she appeared somewhat unfriendly, even stern.

It seems as if the tragedy which had befallen her in the pioneer years when her first husband drowned in 1879 could not be resolved so easily. The family Bible, which was bought in 1903, contains a sombre entry in her own handwriting: "My first husband was drowned in the Rat River on July 11, 1879, and buried on the 18th, and his daughter Getruda, Mrs. A. Dueck, died in childbirth on January 19, 1908, and was buried together with her daughter Lena. Another granddaughter Katherina had already died in 1905. In 1918 daughter Sara died."

The fact that this entry was made in her own handwriting, in the first person, when previously Grandfather had entered all births, deaths and marriages, suggests that she wanted the story of her family and their tragedies passed on to the next generation. It appears that the death of her last daughter flooded her memory with past unhappy experiences.

There are indications that Grandfather exuded a kind of overbearing family strength that threatened to place her family into a less favourable relationship. Although Grandfather may never have verbalized such sentiments, Aunt Susanna volunteered that this explained Grandmother's reserved and melancholy nature. On July 31, 1927, Grandmother died unexpectedly of a heart attack while making her bed. Quietly she had lived and without a commotion she passed away.

Father grew up in a family of eight children, one brother and seven sisters. The oldest two were half-sisters from Grandmother's first marriage. For reasons Father never shared with us we did not know of his half-sisters until many, many years later. Getruda married Aaron Dyck from the Grunthal area in the East Reserve. I did not learn to know that family. The other sister, Sara, married Jacob Banman. They joined the Swedenborgian Church and in 1900 were released from the Sommerfelder Church. The family first located south of Lowe Farm, then moved to Chaplin, Saskatchewan. The Banmans died young and their children were given to various homes in the area where they

married into the Anglo Saxon community. I discovered them only in 1985 through my genealogical search into my family.

Father's only brother, Peter, an entrepreneurial type born before his time, became a machinist and inventor. Although he was not a miller by trade, we took our rye to his place for grinding into the best rye flour. Three of Father's sisters, Agatha, Susanna and Maria, married farmers. Anna remained single and became the aunt we treasured most. Helena married a farmer who ran into financial difficulty, so later earned his living working for others. Agatha's family joined the migration to Mexico. We related more often to Maria's family. There appeared to be some kind of sophistication or awe surrounding Father's clan. Maybe I had this feeling because there were no alcoholics among them. Maybe it was because of their more formal religious culture.

Father, *Jacob P. Gerbrandt*, was born at Lichtfelde southwest of Altona on November 11, 1886. He attended the local private school until age 13 when the family moved to the Lowe Farm area. He claimed he had a new teacher every year and only one who had been able to teach. Throughout his life he regretted his lack of formal education. Even in his short memoirs he draws attention to his lack of education but shares how he tried to broaden his understanding of the world through extensive reading. Early in life he bought a world atlas printed in London, England. Through that atlas he acquired a fairly comprehensive understanding of the world, the countries as they were defined in 1907, industry and commerce. What was important to us children was his understanding of the solar system, the rotation of the earth on its axis, the planets and their relationship to the sun and the stars. However, jokingly we also talked of the flat earth and the pancake fence that kept people from falling off the edge. I was really shaken years later when I discussed Sunday School teaching privileges with a school board to find that some people really believed those stories.

My father's family was concentrated in the southern Altona area, whereas Mother's family tended to be in the more northerly Lowe Farm region. They even spoke different Low German dialects. Our southern cousins talked of *Ohm* Joakop and *Auntjemum* whereas our Lowe Farm cousins simply said it correctly, *Taunte* (aunt) and *Onkel* (uncle). We and our Lowe Farm cousins had jam and jelly on the bread, the southern cousins had *Soppsel*.*

* A thin jam commonly made from chokecherries.

people were backward and didn't know as much of the world as we did. We lived in the centre of the world and felt good about it.

Father loved farm work and acknowledged that he had worked hard for his father. A friend of his youth, Cornelius Heinrichs, related some years ago how he and Father and another friend, Peter Rempel, had met almost every day, even during the busy seeding and harvest times. Heinrichs walked about a mile south, Rempel a mile north and Father about a mile northeast to visit with one another. All were rather stoically oriented and honed their sense of self-control. Father used to share how he and Rempel had sat together in church pinching each other without changing their facial expressions. Father carried that trait to the end of his life. Pain was not to be shown and sickness was not mentioned. He was never in a hospital. In fact, none of us children ever saw him sick in bed.

Father's friendship with Rempel remained firm to the end with one short, but unhappy interruption. For many years Father and Rempel were choristers in the Kronsweide Sommerfelder Church. They spent many enjoyable evenings together visiting and learning new chorales from the *Gesangbuch*,^{*} Both knew their *Ziffern*^{**} and, with the help of their tuning forks, they tackled totally new melodies. Then during the 1930s that harmony was temporarily strained when they found themselves in different churches as a result of the revival movements which swept the community. Later they associated more intimately again. When Father's body rested in the Altona Funeral Home, Rempel came to pay his respects and, in memory of their lives together, sang a beautiful chorale at his coffin.

One of Father's more memorable experiences as a youth was a trip to Winnipeg with Grandfather taken shortly after the turn of the century. He loved talking nostalgically about that trip—how he and Grandfather walked to Lowe Farm, took the train to Winnipeg, then by horse coach looked for a hotel for the night. Father appreciated the strange sights but, most of all, he enjoyed the agricultural exhibition. The recently invented cylinder threshing machine was on display. Since sheaves were not available for the demonstration they witnessed how it chewed through wooden orange crates. Probably on that trip Grandfather got into the speculation market and purchased a number

* The *Gesangbuch*, a hymnbook with 730 German hymns and chorales, was first published in Prussia. It was taken to Ukraine in the 1790s and to Manitoba in the 1870s.

** A musical notation system in which numbers stand for the musical notes.

of vacant lots in a new area of Winnipeg. He paid the taxes on those lots until his retirement in 1917 and Father carried on until he lost them during the Depression years. Unfortunately, Father burned some of his bad-debt papers before he died. I have tried but have not been able to find the location of those lots on a Winnipeg map. A clerk in the Winnipeg land titles office told me there were a million such lost lots and I would have to pay a researcher many days' wages to trace them to their first purchasers.

2

The Gerbrandt Clan

Helena Penner was twenty-one years old. Life definitely had not been a bed of roses. Since the age of 15 her parental home in Lowe Farm had been a small, one-room shack with a lean-to for summer use. And there were seven children younger than she. Two younger sisters, Aganetha and Margaretha, were old enough to go to work, but Sara, Anna and the three brothers—John, Henry and Jacob—were still at home. There simply was not enough room in the house and barely enough food for them all. But Helena wanted more than space to sleep—she wanted a place to meet her boyfriend Jacob Gerbrandt.

The house provided no cozy nook for serious courtship. She well remembered how embarrassingly painful it had been when her fiancé first visited her at home. Her younger brothers Henry and Jacob had taken Jacob's buffalo coat and, using the sleeves as buggy shafts, had converted it into a sleigh. Years later when Uncle Henry related that incident he grew nostalgic and recalled how beautiful Helena had been when her freckled face turned red with anger.

From the time her parents had moved from Heuboden about 12 years earlier she had stayed with her grandparents, the Heinrich Friesens, south of Horndean. More recently she had worked at various households in the Lowe Farm area. There is some dispute over where she was on the morning of her wedding. According to one tradition she had been in the Jacob Heppner residence on the northern outskirts of the village. There Marie Heppner readied her clothes for the January 24, 1911, wedding. Some time earlier Marie had helped Helena order her dress material from Eatons. Mrs. Marie Heppner Hiebert shared details about Helena's wedding with me before she died.

The alternative tradition comes from the Nickel clan, Mother's sister Nettie's family. Their story says that Mother was not at the Heppners at the time of her wedding, but at the Crouches where Mrs. Cora Crouch helped her with final preparations. Helena had arranged with Mrs. Crouch that her sister Aganetha would succeed her as household maid. In turn Mrs. Crouch promised Aganetha she would clothe her first baby for one year if she would name it Cora. That is how Mary Nickel Enns received her name Cora Mary. That account still allows for Marie Heppner's role in ordering the material for the dress, possibly even helping with the dressing.

We can only surmise which of life's memories crowded through Helena's mind at that moment. Ruefully she may have recalled her mother's anguished confession of how she had wished all her babies might die in infancy to forego the tragedies of the world and the Penner poverty and problems. Perhaps she thought of those beautiful, innocent years with her grandparents and the trepidation at coming to Lowe Farm to begin her career as a working girl. She may have remembered how she felt when she went into the rich homes of the Reimers, the Heppners and the Crouches. She must have recalled that rambunctious boy Henry in the Reimer home who later claimed she had made out of him what he had become: a respectable businessman. She probably remembered how strange it had been to work in that "Yankee" home with a culture and language so different than hers. But she treasured the experiences and the new menus she had learned to cook and bake. Now she was all dressed up, waiting for her fiancé to pick her up for the wedding.

Helena heard the sleigh bells. There around the bend of the Heppner driveway from behind the grove of shrubs came Jacob Gerbrandt. The snowbank had hidden him from view until he turned into the yard near the house. As usual he was driving that vicious prancing chestnut mare, Jin, a horse always straining at the bit. She knew that horse and also remembered how scared she had been on earlier rides. Jacob, wearing his heavy buffalo coat and cap, appeared to be calm and collected. He came to the door and, with a final look of approval from Marie Heppner, the two were off to Helena's home, the Penner residence.

It is impossible to visualize that wedding completely. It was January and the temperature had dropped to minus 24 degrees Celsius during the night. It was now up to minus 18 C and there was considerable snow on the ground. As was the case in those days, the single pane windows were heavily frosted. The bride was dressed in the traditional

Sommerfelder black dress and the dark, lace church cap which all young women wore when they got married. The groom was sharply dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and dark tie that was neatly tied. The minister, Jacob Schroeder, a close family friend, was dressed in his clerical black jacket and black shirt. His sermon is not available but years later he always included the following blessing in his weddings. He probably used it here as well.

What blessedness is yours
Dear newlyweds today;
May God his blessing on you shower
And joys abundantly.
May He with children bless your home
And draw them to his heav'n;
Like branches round your table set,
And fruits of faithful marriage giv'n.
What blessedness is yours,
He will be with you forever,
Will write your name with His own Hand
Into the Book of Life for forever.
The Church of Christ will stand
Built by your labours true;
If only you will love and fear the Lord,
All will be well for you.

One can only imagine how foul the air must have been in the room during the reception. Uncle Abram Klassen, though not at the wedding, said he was positive that most of the men will have rolled and lit up their cigarettes. The windows could not be opened in winter. With the low temperature outside and the hot humid air inside, an open door would have created a lot of steam.

Uncle Henry remembered Helena as a very beautiful bride. After the wedding the young couple got into Father's sleigh and Jin, who obviously was very cold, furiously began snorting and pawing the air. Slowly they drove down the main street toward the hall for the wedding dance. Uncle Henry claimed that the scene with the horse prancing and pawing the air as they drove into the sunset had been very picturesque and unforgettable. Very likely Jacob's good friend Peter Rempel was in charge of the music and entertainment.

Jacob Gerbrandt did not have a home of his own, nor did he have the magic touch that made farming as profitable for him as it had been for his father. After the wedding they moved into his parental home. For Helena that must have been a happy experience. Her years as kitchen maid were over. No longer would she have to go from home

to home to do heavy chores for very little remuneration. And in those days what little she earned was taken by her father. No longer would she have to walk into the Kronsweide Church as a kitchen maid, the daughter of a poor, working, drinking man, and sit with the girls and women who belonged to the landowners. Now she too belonged to the Mennonite gentry. She had a room that she could call her own.

Helena still had many hurdles to overcome. She and Jacob were not the only ones sharing his parental home. There was Agatha, five years her senior, and unmarried; also Anna, one year older, and the two younger sisters, Susanna, 18, and Maria, 14. She knew Anna from when they had been in catechism class in church and had been baptized on the same day. Anna and Maria were quiet but Susanna overflowed with laughter.

Other dynamics also entered into play. Helena had been a working girl whereas her new sisters-in-law had no experience being away from the farm. Then, just a month after the wedding, she was pregnant. The Gerbrandt tendency to be somewhat composed and tranquil may have helped the situation. The slower pace even allowed time for reading. The family's devotion to religious activities and the church probably were rather new to her. However, their strict conservatism made it necessary to give up regular attendance at the Lowe Farm *Jugendverein*, although occasional participation may have been allowed.

A year after my parents were married, Father purchased from Grandfather the northwest quarter of section 13-4-2w located three miles south and half-a-mile west of Lowe Farm. The price was \$40 per acre. Father also purchased four horses, several cows and the necessary farm equipment. It appears there was little exchange of money at the time. No records exist which indicate how much money Father had when he launched out on his own. It appears his total debt to Grandfather was close to \$6,300. His little black book showed that he paid Grandfather \$4,252 on the capital and \$3,030 in interest during the next 14 years.

In 1926 Father took a mortgage from the Sommerfelder *Waisenamt* for \$2,247 to pay off Grandfather. That note, which was later taken over by some mortgage company, almost caused Father to lose the farm during the Depression. A family story says he also paid on a mortgage note for a friend. Father was a man of few words and just wouldn't talk about that bad debt. My brother John maintains that man paid off his loan with a skinny cow. When Father retired he burned all his records.

One of the horses included in the purchase from Grandfather was the flamboyant, chestnut mare Jin which had seen Father through his courtship and marriage experiences. For years after that horse had spark and colour. She continued rearing up and always performed some kind of dancing antics before feeding. I still recall how I feared that horse. She had more energy to burn than all the other horses put together.

Sadly, about 20 years later, when Mother had already died, Father had remarried and the Depression was merciless, the spark faded from Jin's eyes due to old age, poor feed and deteriorating health. Father was forced to sell her as feed for foxes. A buyer in Rosenfeld paid \$5.00 for old horses. Father took Jin, tied her behind his buggy and left for Rosenfeld. No one knows how much of that horse's story flooded his memory on that slow, lonely trip. She had been so energetic and vicious and now was limping badly. Close to Rosenfeld he met an old friend, Henry Pokrant. He shared his sentimental memories and how that horse was interwoven with his courtship and marriage. Pokrant suggested he not dispose of a horse to which he attached some rather sacred, sentimental feelings in such an ignoble way. Father wavered, yet there was the reality of the situation: five dollars for the family, one less horse to feed through the winter and, even more crucially, his first love in which that chapter of life was rooted had disappeared as mist in the morning. He sold the horse. Father shared this experience only years later with his son Jake. I doubt whether he ever told his second wife.

As soon as the land was purchased, Father began planning and developing the yard, approximately 250 yards wide and 300 yards long. His first building was the barn, 24 feet by 40 feet, with a lean-to, 12 feet by 40 feet, running along the west side. At first two large rooms at the south end of the barn served as our living quarters, combining living room, bedroom, kitchen and everything else. A narrow gangway ran from the lean-to to the barn.

When the family increased in size, one room was built in the lean-to which originally had been used for storage of feed grain. The hallway between the lean-to and the barn-house was where we kept our barn clothes. Because of the way it was constructed, with a door at either end, that passage also became the storage place for foul barn odours which naturally provided "perfume" for the clothes and penetrated all areas of the living quarters. Fortunately, noses were not as sensitive in those days! The barn had six stalls. When I was a boy it usually housed



My parents, Jacob P. and Helena Penner Gerbrandt in 1927, three years prior to Mother's death.

four horses and five or six cows, with room for a pen for calves and heifers. A narrow stall opposite the hallway to the house was used for feed which was thrown down from the hay loft.

Records are not available whether Father built the hog and chicken barn that first year. It seems as if that building was always part of the yard. A few years later a granary was built. I remember well how I helped Father clean the grain in the middle of winter and how my feet and hands became very cold.

In the earlier years we had a summer kitchen just southwest of the living part of our house-barn. A summer kitchen was a must for all farms at that time. That's where all cooking, eating, laundry and other household chores like running the cream separator, were done during the summer. By the time I was big enough to swing a hammer, Father built a new summer kitchen and the old one was converted into a smokehouse.

The garden was developed in the northeast corner of the yard. The driveway to the municipal road ran just west of it. I still remember when Father made up an order for trees for a shelter belt from the Indian Head (Saskatchewan) Experimental Station. Those trees deco-

rated the yard well. It was too bad they were poplar. Their life span on the Lowe Farm clay was all too short.

Landscaping for the garden and the layout of the trees were designed so that a suitable spot was left for a dream house. For many years my parents planned that house. We looked at several possible house designs and drew up various house plans. But the devastating Depression and the tragedy of Mother's early death in 1930 changed all that. The dream house never materialized.

The first child to come into our home was *Mary*. She was born on November 20, 1911. Mary probably had the most difficult growing-up experience. She was caught in the Mennonite tradition which required that the oldest daughter had to help with raising the rest of the family. She was also part of the Mennonite struggle with the Manitoba government regarding control of their schools. Consequently her days in school, especially in qualified English schools, were cut very short.

The tremendous task of taking over the household duties in 1930 also fell on Mary. After Mother's untimely death, Father went into deep grief and depression caused by guilt. Mother's death also drove home to us the stark reality that the Depression was making us poor. It is significant that we children had never heard of poverty before Mother died. Mary was left with the load of planning the children's clothing, making the meals and disciplining her siblings, but also being supportive of Father.

About a year after Mother's death, Mary entered into a good relationship with John Gerbrandt, a distant relative of ours. She married him several weeks after Father's second marriage. Although John was 26 and I only 16, he had made a concerted effort during the previous threshing season to be my friend. At the time I had been totally oblivious to his designs on my sister Mary. John was a great fellow and it seems like only yesterday when he came for his first official visit on a motorcycle. Unfortunately for Mary, our living quarters were crowded and, not knowing how serious the visit was, she remained in the room with all the younger siblings who were trying to hear and interpret all the juicy conversation pieces. Furthermore, John had eaten too much Mennonite sauerkraut borscht just before he came. He squirmed all evening with an embarrassing intestinal battle. We younger siblings found that most hilarious. On another visit John brought his record player, an old machine that needed constant cranking. All evening he put on new records of cowboy and blue grass music.

Soon after their marriage John began having health problems. A bout with rheumatic fever during childhood had damaged his heart. After a six-year struggle with a leaking heart valve and a debt-ridden farm operation, he passed away. Mary was left with a small son. Subsequently she moved to Altona, married twice and both times had to nurse an ill husband until his death. She worked for many years in the sheltered workshop for the mentally handicapped in Altona. Mary died in 1991 after fighting valiantly against a threatening blood ailment. Through all her experiences she continued her service to others and the church.

The second child, *Sara*, was born on October 7, 1913. She was truly a Gerbrandt with her ruddy complexion and brown eyes that were slightly crossed. Sara did not have the responsibilities which Mary had to shoulder. As I look back, it seems she was always good and self-controlled. In contrast to Mary and me, who read stacks of Zane Grey cowboy stories, Sara focused on love stories and the serialized stories in the *Free Press Prairie Farmer*.

Sara married John Friesen, a tall handsome farmer. His parents, the Martin Friesens, and our parents were visiting friends. At that time our family was in transition from a strict Sommerfelder to a more evangelical church tradition. Sara's boyfriend, who was from a more traditional background where the *Jugendverein* was not so acceptable, usually took her to the Kronswede evening program. John always drove a bay-coloured horse named Polly. One evening when they were returning from *Jugendverein* a back-up strap on the harness came undone. There was suspicion that was not an accident. The horse soon became aware of the situation and, when John tried to pull on the reins, the buggy ran into the horse. The horse took off in full gallop. It appeared they were heading for a serious spill. Then, even though the horse was going full speed, John jumped off, ran beside the buggy and brought the horse to a stop.

I was in a very interesting child psychology class in Elim Bible School at the time Sara and John were raising their children. On one of my visits to their home I tested my newly gained insight on her girls. Sara kindly suggested that I get my own children and try my great learning on them. On another occasion I recall writing a letter to Sara. As was custom in Bible school at the time, I started the letter with a Bible greeting, using Psalm 50:10. By return mail Sara drew attention to what the verse said: "All the animals of the forest are mine and all the cattle on the mountains are mine." She fired back and asked, "Are

you out of your mind? When did you acquire all that wealth?" Humbly I acknowledged that I had meant Psalm 50:23: "He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me; to him who orders his way aright I will show the salvation of God!"

Sara's husband John became a minister, later bishop, in the Sommerfelder Church. She supported him wholeheartedly and dressed conservatively for all occasions. Sadly, she died of a kidney complication when she was not yet 40 years old. Sara was loved far beyond her own family. John remarried and remained the bishop of the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church until 1993 when a younger man was called.

The sister next to me is *Helena*, born on February 5, 1918. It seems Helena was always kind and loving. Possibly she mellowed under the burden of having grown up when the family was in a period of transition. She was 14 when Father remarried. Suddenly, there were seven younger siblings. Helena had to work hard, doing laundry, cooking and babysitting for so many.

She married Peter Dueck of the Rosefarm district. Shortly after their marriage, Peter was called to do his alternative service in the Clear Lake Forest Reservation. After the war they bought a farm southwest of Lowe Farm. Peter was called to the ministry in the Lowe Farm Bergthaler Mennonite Church. He served many years, first as assistant to the leading minister Peter P. Heinrichs, later as leader. He also served on the Elim Bible School Board and on the provincial and Canadian mission boards. Helena was always a quiet, loving person and a peacemaker and encourager to many. She passed away in February 1994 after a series of strokes.

Following Helena came *Susanna*, born on July 27, 1919. She lived only 18 months. A sweeping illness at the time, summer sickness, took its toll of small children. It was an intestinal infection with diarrhoea. I still recall—I was almost five at the time—how we clustered around her crib. When she appeared to be struggling to die, Father stopped the clock and she stopped breathing. I was told later that the custom of stopping the clock was a Mennonite tradition rooted in superstition. The funeral was at our country home. For the drive to the cemetery the tiny coffin was placed in the back seat of Henry Groening's new Reo car. How fortunate it was that we had no premonition of the future. Only ten years later that same Reo, with its top down, would be used to take Mother's coffin to its final resting place.

On May 19, 1921, brother *Jake* entered the Gerbrandt family circle.

Jake was always healthy and strong. He had an uncanny knack for getting help from Mother. He insisted that only she could help him up after a fall. Clearly it was impossible for Mother to run all over the yard to lift him up but he refused help from anyone else. Mother solved the problem by telling him to come to her and she would help him get up. That arrangement met with his approval. Whenever he fell down and cried for help, Mother would shout to him, "Come to me and I'll help you." He would jump up, run to her and slither helplessly down beside her to be helped up.

Jake was probably more like Father than any of us: stoic, reserved and firm. He spoke with a clear, loud voice and was very decisive. Jake did his alternative service work on an Ontario farm and became a farmer on his return. He married Nettie Dueck, sister to Peter. Jake was involved with various school and church boards. Jake and Nettie retired from farm work in 1986 and moved to Winkler. They had just set up a comfortable home and begun a fruitful ministry as deacons of their church when Nettie died rather suddenly after struggling valiantly and quietly with painful bone cancer. Jake married Nettie's sister Margaret, then eight months later passed away as a result of a heart attack.

Diedrich, born on March 7, 1924, was the sickly member of the family. He seemed to be the wrong age when Mother died and a new mother came into the home. His chronic tonsillitis and the presence of a bunch of brothers, all robust and aggressive, put him at the bottom of the pile until he was old enough to assert himself and leave home. Through determined effort he got a good education. His alternative service was done in mental hospitals. He chose to be a teacher and minister and served churches in both the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. He married Agnes Giesbrecht of the Bergfeld district. In February 1989 Diedrich suffered a debilitating stroke. Although he now has movement in his legs and can walk some with the help of a walker, it will be a very long and lonesome journey to recovery. His wife Agnes has been marvellous in her patience and help.

John was born on December 14, 1925. He remembers little of Mother, seemingly only the day of her death. He grew up with the other boys who all seemed to be the same age. John was young enough to appreciate the uniqueness and goodness of our second mother. He does not remember the times which both families looked back on as the so-called "good old days" of their former nuclear families. John has



My family in 1986 (back row, from left): Henry, Diedrich, Jacob, Ed, Peter, John; (front row): Helena Gerbrandt Dueck, Maria Gerbrandt Heinrichs.

good memories of his new mother's cooking, her concern for spiritual values and her contribution to Christian family togetherness. John claims his years in public school were not challenging, therefore he made no attempt to continue in high school. He appears to have been born to farm and did very well. He married Agatha Dueck of the Rosefarm district. John did his alternative service on a farm. Although he was an active church person, he did not press for public offices. He and Agatha have been staunch supporters of their church and Christian activities. They now live in retirement in Winkler. John carried on and enjoyed his suitcase farming until 1993.

The last to join the Gerbrandt family were *Pete* and *Ed*, born on August 12, 1927. They were identical twins, so much the same that they were both called Pete-n-Ed. They were special, even in the way they were raised. Apparently, because there were two, Mother decided she could not nurse them sufficiently. They became our Eaton's Nestle Food boys. Every so often a new order for Nestle food had to be made. Their good looks drew the admiration of people far and wide. At the Morris Country Fair in 1928, a representative for an organization which sponsored a baby and twins contest pestered Mother to place her children in the contest. Mother remained adamant. Her babies were not for public show. They needed no more attention than they already were receiving.

Pete and Ed, though different in personality, regularly confused people. In school they were mischievous and often faked their identity. If one had not done his homework, he could easily pass off the other's work as his own. The teachers required that they wear different jackets but they only needed to make a trip to the school outhouse, exchange jackets and come out with different names. The school was rather poorly run and staffed at the time and neither was challenged to continue beyond Grade 8. Father had six sons but Pete and Ed remained his *Junges* (boys) to the end of his life.

According to some authorities, one twin always leads, the other follows. In our twins Pete was the leader. After school they began to earn money, Pete in hydro work and Ed in drywall installation. Ed married Mary Kehler of Lowe Farm and Pete, Neta Penner of the Rosefarm district. Both went into farming in the Crystal City area. For a number of years the two families shared the same house and, it was rumoured, the same wallet. When the families grew, they developed separate farms. Even after many years in Crystal City, some people in the church could still not tell them apart.

Both brothers developed heart problems early in life. First Ed had major by-pass surgery; some time later he suffered a heart attack. He survived and is doing quite well at the present time. He sold his farm, bought a house in Crystal City and works on a farm in the community. Pete also had major by-pass surgery, then a few years later had a major heart attack. He did not survive a second by-pass operation. Neta has vacated the farm for a house in Crystal City.

I, *Henry*, joined the family in the depth of a Canadian winter. The temperature hovered around minus 36 C on the day before and rose to minus 30 C for December 6, 1915. Deep snow covered the ground. The whole country was in sorrow with World War I in its second year. The *Winnipeg Free Press* was filled with casualty reports. Even the publisher's own son was missing in action. My birthplace was a humble two-room apartment built into the south end of the barn on the family farm. Mother told me later I had been a frail child. I had pneumonia when I was six weeks old. When the illness struck a second time when I was two, the doctors informed Mother that I might not live.

The conversational language in our home was Low German. Our Bible readings and church services were in (High) German. I do not remember learning English. When I started school I knew the primer stories by memory. Presumably my older sisters had repeated them so

often. Naturally our English was very flat and often a poor translation from the Low German sentence structure.

We read a lot in our home. It seems we were all addicted. *Der Nordwesten*, called *Courier* today, the *Rundschau* and its companion *Der Kinderbote*, *Die Steinbach Post* and naturally the *Free Press Prairie Farmer* were our weekly contacts with the world. Father was keenly interested in world affairs. I recall how closely he followed Germany's development after World War I. He kept track of the many elections, the numerous collapses of government and the rise of Hitler. When the *Free Press* came, even in summer, we found time at noon, *Faspa* or evening to read it. The paper was pulled apart in many directions. One person wanted the "funnies," another the Pathfinders, another the serial story and, naturally, someone wanted the news stories.

Pig butchering bees were important events in the life of the community. Neighbours and friends were invited for the butchering. Several memories come to mind. As long as I remember I was against killing. I recall my compassion for those pigs. One morning, while it was still totally dark and my parents and their invited guests were eating breakfast, I went to the pigpen to talk to those poor pigs. I told them, "You are doomed and I am helpless."

A standard feature of pig butchering bees was the large cauldron of boiling lard in the summer kitchen. As soon as I was big enough to handle the large ladle, I was posted at one cauldron to stir it. Naturally around me were the mothers of the district, all engaged in sharing the latest news. Included in their discussion one year was that most delicate of matters: birth control. Normally families were quite large at that time yet these women wanted small families. Innocently they assumed that the poor boy struggling with the large ladle was lost in daydreaming. I appeared to be, yet my ears were glued to other people's conversations, trying to hear something new. I learned that one woman managed to have her babies only every three years, another every four years. At our home they came every second year. The trick, according to them, was nursing as long as possible. I made no comments and will resist doing so now. Another subject discussed around the cauldron of lard was the use of motor oil. One woman always knew which motor oil was absolutely good and which was totally useless.

An unusual aspect of those bees was the serving of wine. At our home we were virtually teetotallers. Mother had seen enough alcohol in her home to last a lifetime. But at the pig butchering bee a bottle of

wine was served. Father bought the wine and served it sparingly.

Generally we children experienced life to be quite comfortable. Our parents may have been concerned that the farm income was too small, but we remained unaware of it. The years after World War I were good years for the Canadian farmer. Normally, crops were quite ample, even though smaller than present yields which have been increased through heavy use of fertilizers. During those years we bought a new car and a tractor; we ate and lived well. Later Father may have wondered why he had not paid off the debt on the farm when times were relatively good.

Compared to more recent times our lifestyle was frugal. Our food was simple but quite adequate. We always butchered three or four hogs, occasionally a heifer or an aging cow. A calf was usually butchered for the threshing season. We had our potatoes, carrots and sauerkraut. Sauerkraut borscht, pickled pigs' feet or parsnip soup were the diet of the day. There were pastas like noodles, macaroni, *vereniki* and lots of biscuits. When visitors came—and they always came unannounced and uninvited — pickled pork and borscht were served in winter and fried eggs and potatoes in summer. In spring, when the early cabbage heads were still very small and the young roosters had just begun to crow, we had our first summer cabbage borscht. I don't know whether any foods since have tasted more delicious than that first borscht. We drank lots of milk and Mother made many dishes with a milk base.

Leisure activities for us children were rather limited. Visiting was confined to those friends and relatives who lived within distances accessible by horse and sleigh. Our car was regularly placed on blocks for the winter. It seems we always had huge banks of snow around the yard. That was good for sledding down the hills. We read a lot. I vividly recall how snug it felt when Father would read to us from books like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Mother would knit, and we would sit on the floor around them. A young child of the 1990s might find that kind of life mundane and meaningless. Naturally, we did not know about radio and television. The few toys we had were homemade. I built carts, cars that steered, and even a dredge that dug ditches around my farm which I had created in the garden. One summer I spent so much time trying to fashion two paddles from an iron bar that my sister began to call me *Kjnekjswal* (crankshaft).

In winter the single pane windows were covered with heavy hoarfrost. That meant we couldn't look out, so we would thaw holes into

the frost with our thumbs so we could identify the sleighs that were going by. With no running motors in the house and no cars on the roads in winter, sounds carried far in the frosty air. Sleigh bells could be heard half-a-mile away as could the singing of the Rempel family as they passed by. We enjoyed watching the rabbits play under the trees in our garden and listening to the partridges and prairie chickens drum their music. Although we could also get bored I think generally we were happier than the young children of today who are constantly tempted to pester their parents for the newest gadget or doll that comes on the market or who simply must have the newest videos and *nintendo* devices.

Naturally work was an important part of regular routine. Our chores were strictly segregated. The girls worked in the house and the boys on the yard and in the fields. I cannot recall whether we boys ever did the dishes. Milking was a female chore. During harvest the girls helped with the stooking. When we children were all small Mother helped with stooking and setting the stacks of hay and oat sheaves. I still recall when we had to tend the baby in a carriage while Mother stooked. When it was time to nurse the baby, Father would make a round with the baby on the binder seat until he reached the place where Mother was stooking. She would nurse it and on the next round he would return it to its carriage.

The 1928 harvest was difficult. The grain was heavy and the soil was very soggy. Father built a one-cylinder, three-horsepower motor onto the binder and lengthened the tongue which led to the front wheels. The extra weight made the contraption too heavy for four horses. So the Fordson tractor had to be used. Wooden cleats were screwed to the wheels to carry it through the mud. I recall one bad afternoon. We travelled through mud and water. Once when the binder stopped functioning Father began to crank the binder while I was driving. I merrily drove along until he struck me with the whip. It was not painful but my feelings were hurt. He had been in trouble. The binder had started to turn and in the process he had lost the crank. In the evening Mother had to soothe both of our feelings.

Our circle of friends was quite limited. The neighbours to the northwest were Peter K. Rempels. They had moved there at the same time as my grandparents settled in the area. The Rempel family numbered 18 members from two marriages. Mr. Rempel survived two major accidents. Once the block and tackle came off the track and fell on his head; a second time he fell into the basement. Both times his

skull was badly hurt. Although he was unconscious for weeks, the typical pioneer ruggedness and resourcefulness brought him through.

The son of Peter K. Rempel, Peter P., became Father's bosom friend. The family, which lived half a mile to the east, was probably closest to us. The Rempels' farm operation was somewhat larger than ours. They had one-and-a-half quarters of land and had a separate house. When Father bought a new Ford they bought a new Star. It was a gorgeous sleek car with a three-speed transmission and a muffler that only whispered. My sisters and their three daughters were close friends. We spent many evenings together. Their only son was somewhat younger than I. Some of our playtime together has left me with unforgettable memories.

Another family we related to were the John Nickels. Mrs. Nickel was one of Mother's cousins. The Nickels were religiously and culturally more conservative, but what bothered us was that Mr. Nickel was a chain smoker. We were sorry to see them leave for South America when their children were pressured to go to the English school.

Our nearest neighbours were the Cornelius Gerbrandts, Father's second cousin. They bought Grandfather's farm in 1917. The Gerbrandt family was more legalistic in its religion than we were, yet seemed more open to the world. They were very good neighbours. When Jake and I could not be together he would climb a tree and I a haystack and we would carry on a shouting conversation. Our mothers shared many things and freely borrowed from each other.

Farther west were the Bernard Funks and the Jacob Dycks. Mrs. Funk had a unique Prussian Low German. To the east were the Martin Friesens, possibly the wealthiest farmers in the community. Our parents exchanged visits with them regularly. Another related family were the Bernard Thiessens.

Father's siblings from the south usually paid us an annual visit and we returned it as often. Several of Mother's siblings came occasionally. The Henry Groenings came more frequently. They always came late. Once when we heard their Reo come down the lane we had already gone to bed. It may seem strange today but I could detect makes of cars by their exhaust mufflers and in the evening by their headlights. In great haste we had to dress for visitors. We especially enjoyed visits by the George Nickels, Mother's sister.

It was always a treat to go to Uncle Peter's, Father's brother. He had a machine shop with rebuilt cars and tractors. He was an inventor who built a snowmobile, possibly one of the first in Manitoba. Aunt

Elizabeth was always in bed but we didn't believe she was sick. The story was that she always hopped into bed when visitors came. Later we learned that she probably was handicapped. She died at a ripe old age. We always enjoyed visiting Father's sister Helen. She baked beautiful buns and made a very good *Faspa* out of practically nothing.

Visiting the Gerbrandt grandparents in Altona was always a special occasion. They were a model retired couple. They lived on a five-acre plot of land adjacent to Altona where they could keep a cow, some chickens, a pig and a lame mare named Liz. The two aunts, Anna and Susanna, did the chores inside and outside. Grandmother looked after the flower garden. Grandfather directed affairs like a retired statesman. We especially enjoyed their visits to our place. I still see us children perched on the garage roof, looking south to see that top buggy with the brown horse with a slight limp. I believe we could spot them five or six miles away. Grandfather lived like a gentleman until the crash of the New York Stock Exchange, which in turn brought about the collapse of the Sommerfelder *Waisenamt*. He died a poor man.

Christmas was good at both grandparents. The Altona grandfather was always lavish with his acknowledgement of good Christmas recitations. He paid as high as 75 cents. That was a lot of money during the 1920s. I don't recall how much the Lowe Farm grandfather paid out. There was ample food at both places. Usually there was baked ham, *Plümemooss*, buns, cakes and cookies. Turkeys had not yet invaded the Mennonite Christmas menus. Three events changed for all time the Christmases at the Altona grandparents. In 1925 Aunt Susanna married; in 1927 Grandmother died; and in 1929-30 Grandfather lost his money.

We were a happy family planted right into the centre of the world. Several miles east of us was a French settlement. North of us was Lowe Farm with a number of English people still hanging on, although their children were learning Low German. And to the northwest were many English farmers. Generally we lumped together all people who did not speak our Low German and called them *Enjelända* (English people). The Kronsweide school and church district was part of a settlement that had developed in 1898 and later. The hardy, adventurous farmers were a spillover from the reserve lands further south. In our immediate area all settlers spoke Low German except the Kruegers and the Karlenzigs who spoke a different Prussian dialect. The Karlenzigs were Mennonite Brethren-Baptist; the Kruegers seemed to be non-church people. One family, the Cornelius Driedgers, were Bergthaler.

The rest of the community all belonged to the local Sommerfelder Mennonite Church.

The Kronsweide community was conservative yet there were significant differences between it and the reserve communities to the south. All its residents had left the shelter of those reserves. In the Lowe Farm area they had settled on farms originally laid out and developed by Ontario and American land speculators. Although culturally and theologically those new settlers were linked to their former churches in the south, in lifestyle they were loosening up. They appeared to have fewer inhibitions in relating to non-Mennonite neighbours and to the Lowe Farm business community which, before the turn of the century, had been predominantly non-Mennonite. Gradually, however, Mennonites were replacing them.

Living on the fringe produced a whole set of special dynamics. Loose living and severe alcohol problems were not uncommon. The easier way of relating to non-church people resulted in the withdrawal from the church by a number of Mennonites. When I was a young lad hardly any of the Lowe Farm residents related to any church. That included my maternal grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. The question, of course, is whether this was the result of living in that community, or whether many of the Lowe Farm and community residents already earlier may have loosened their church connections and intentionally moved to a more open society where the church had less influence.

For my parents the world was not only present in the non-church people; that is, with the *Enjelända*. Tobacco, alcohol, foul language, dishonesty, even immorality also were knocking on Mennonite doors. Mother knew only too well how it had affected her home and her siblings. From my faintest childhood memories we were taught not to do the sinful things where were practised by so many other people. Sister Mary recalled that Father still played the accordion at dances when she was a child but, because of the increasing use of alcohol, he withdrew from any participation.

My parents had high moral standards. Drinking and smoking were regarded as wrong. They did not play cards and used very clean language. Slang was not permitted. We found ourselves hampered because our community people loosely used phrases like *Dü Dommkopp* (you crazy head), or *Dü Schnoddanäs* (you dirty nose). We could not even say *Dü best ferekjt* (You are crazy). I was really stunned when Father, in a telephone conversation with one of the neighbours, said

Dü Schopskopp (you sheep head). I thought he was swearing. Although Mother did not wash our mouths with soap when she caught us using such language, she made it very clear that such language was not acceptable in our household. She simply said, *Daut jeziemt sikj nijch* (That is not becoming to us). Apparently she heard a different drummer which most others did not hear.

3

The Student: Overcoming Hurdles

Horse-drawn vehicles and various newly purchased cars converged on a farmyard in the Kronsweide School District. The Sommerfelder male members were coming to discuss a very serious issue. It was late in 1917 and the whole Mennonite community was tense. The government was threatening to close all Mennonite private schools unless they complied with its new directives. Sombre-faced Mennonite fathers were weighing their options, including migrating once more to another country. Under no circumstances were they willing to follow the Lowe Farm model where the first school board included non-Mennonite trustees Alec McLean and Robert Reid. Many of those present saw no alternative but to withdraw their children from the school unless they could reestablish their own private school with its own German school curriculum.

The settlers in the Kronsweide region had brought along from Russia the traditional Mennonite private school. Since 1898 they had operated such a private school without much outside interference. A clause in the 1873 Immigration Document included the following:

The fullest privilege of exercising their religious principles is by law afforded to the Mennonites without any molestation or restriction whatever, and the same privilege extends to the education of their children in schools.

The Mennonite ministers and leading fathers in the district held tenaciously to the letter of that document. Thus, present government

actions appeared unjust. However, with the outbreak of World War I against Germany, the Anglo-Saxon community began to feel very nervous about the Mennonite schools and the perpetuation of German.

Teachers in the Sommerfelder-controlled private schools tended to be poorly qualified. Few of them had much formal education and none of them had been to a government teacher training school. The new government regulations were less threatening for the Bergthaler Church people. They had been instrumental in starting the Mennonite Educational Institute (MEI) as a teacher training centre at Gretna. With the help of government funds they had brought in H. H. Ewert, an approved teacher, from Kansas. The provincial government further supported the venture by appointing Ewert official inspector of Mennonite schools. But there was only one Bergthaler family in the Kronsweide district, the Cornelius Driedgers. The Sommerfelder people preferred to have their own schools with non-certified teachers. They did not want any government interference. They did not even want Ewert to inspect their schools. The government gave them two options, neither of which was really acceptable: either they place qualified, certified teachers into their private schools or the government would open public schools in their districts and force their children to attend.

The curriculum used in the private schools was the same as had been the norm in Russia before Johann Cornies reformed and improved the educational system in the Mennonite colonies. For many decades those schools had used an old primer, called *Die Fibel*, as the basic reader for beginners. It was good inasmuch as it at least taught some reading techniques and helped the child read in syllables. After acquiring some basic reading skills, the child was promoted to the New Testament. Not only was that an immense jump for children in their second year of schooling, but the New Testament did not serve well as a school reader. After the children had worked through the New Testament they moved into the Old Testament, then to the Prussian-published catechism. The schools also taught a practical arithmetic course, but very little geography and nothing that could be called social studies.

Understandably that kind of curriculum did not meet the approval of government inspectors. It did not prepare the child for life beyond Mennonite homes in their secluded reserves nor did it equip the child for citizenship in larger society. Government records in Ottawa show that it was the intention of the government to prepare those hardy German settlers for active life in Canada. Already in 1873 when the

first Mennonite delegation arrived, ambitious government people dreamed of the day when those German settlers would take a leading political role in Canada. Mennonites feared that the recent government actions regarding schools would quickly cause them to lose their ethnic identity. Control of schools was the issue that placed the Sommerfelder, the Reinländer—also called Old Colony—and the Chortitzer on a collision course with the government. Before the school issue was resolved, large numbers from those groups had migrated to Mexico and other Latin American countries.

The years 1915 to 1920 were increasingly difficult for the Kronsweide people. Slowly but relentlessly the new school act was applied. English classes were introduced. A school house was built with government money and English teachers were forcibly installed. Rather mythological stories about those teachers persisted through the decades. The two teachers, Mr. A.C. West and Mr. Thomas E. Black, were both recent war veterans. Some stories claim Mr. Black wore a dagger in his belt in the classroom. After a few days in school my sister Mary came home with a new song:

Sweetly sang the donkey
To the little ass,
If you can't sing better
You shall have no grass.

Neither the words nor the tune could be found in Father's hymn book and tune manual. Naturally there was concern. Some families withdrew their children and a new private school was illegally established in the Peter K. Rempel's summer kitchen. During the year in which the two English teachers attempted to win over the district, attendance averaged six-and-a-half pupils per day when it should have been more than twenty. Sister Mary was one of those attending. Good, sincere Mennonite family heads began to go to court and several were sent to jail. Reportedly one father had two terms in prison. When they gave in and promised to send their children to school they were paroled.

Eventually all Kronsweide families surrendered and by 1920 the district was together again. Ironically, not the courts but properly trained Mennonite teachers won them over. The first such teacher was Maria Friesen who was only a grade 8 graduate from the Mennonite Educational Institute (which had relocated to Altona in 1905). The second was Henry M. Friesen, a fully qualified teacher with training

both in Altona and at Normal School. Together they instilled new confidence in the community. However, it should be noted that a new set of trustees had to be elected to appoint those qualified teachers. The old board would not budge.

In our district two families could not survive the change in school. The Henry Zacharias family moved to Mexico and the John Nickel family joined the movement to Paraguay. The Nickels came back a few years later but did not return to our district. That immigration was traumatic for me because one of the Zacharias boys was my good friend. We had started school together in the spring of 1922.

In the Morden-Haskett region the Old Colony people did not give in to government pressure. As soon as World War I was over they began to search for a new home. They found it in Mexico with the same kind of liberal promises that had drawn them to Manitoba in 1874-76. The Chortitzer Church people from the East Reserve and many Sommerfelder moved to South America. The Mennonite Brethren and the Bergthaler churches accepted the government schools but under the supervision of their own teachers.

Naturally my parents had attended only the traditional Mennonite private school. Through Mother's work in a non-Mennonite home she had learned some English. Although Father regretted his inadequate education, it appears that during the early years of the school controversy he favoured the private school. Initially, my oldest sister Mary was sent there. Whether Father did that because of his legalistic adherence to the Sommerfelder anti-public school position or out of conviction is not known. As far back as I can remember he gave full support to the public school.

When I started school in 1922 the school controversy had subsided. I began with a very good teacher, Mr. Henry M. Friesen. Friesen came from a progressive family. His older brother John had been a school inspector as early as 1903. H.M. and his wife Marie were very good people and had a profound impact on the district. Friesen believed in fairness to all and consistently displayed a solid character of impeccable integrity. But because he was from the Bergthaler Church he did not fully integrate into the district. He left after my first full year of school.

My schooling from grade 2 to grade 6 was uneventful. For some reason we had a new teacher almost every year. That did not instill much enthusiasm in the students. When I came to school there were a number of older boys who really had not learned to read. Their fathers

had kept them out of school or had placed them into a poorly equipped private school. At the time I thought they were very ignorant. They were the product of years of school controversy and parental advice not to do their lessons. Sister Mary always regretted that she was in school during those unhappy days.

Father may have vacillated regarding our education during the time when the Sommerfelder Church promoted the private school. However, he did not waver once the English schools were finally established. He wanted us to be in school every day, even in winter during bad snowstorms. We missed school only if we were ill or when urgent work prevented us from attending. I got a special permit in grade 6 to stay home for spring seeding.

I still remember one incident when I returned to school after such an absence. I did not know that the new teacher had announced a new ruling regarding whispering or talking to other students. The punishment was a strapping on the hand. I whispered to my seat mate after the morning bell rang. I am not sure whether the teacher was afraid or whether he had other motives, but he hesitated to strap me. He put it to a school vote whether I should be strapped. They all voted for me. But while that was going on, a boy in the lower grades whispered. Immediately he got a thrashing. Today that might be considered discrimination as well as child abuse.

Although the public school gradually was established, the vision of the community for education remained rather limited. The school focused almost entirely on the three Rs. Even into the 1930s a few of the school trustees still insisted that the earth was flat and scoffed at teachers who taught the sun was stationary and the earth rotated on its axis. In grade 6 we had a teacher who showed interest in science and nature study. He used the spring season to show us how to find frog's eggs and watch them hatch. We found it extremely interesting to see first the tadpoles, then the little frogs. But the good fathers of the district dubbed him *Poggi Reima* (frog Reimer).

In 1929, when I entered grade 7, a first-class teacher came to the Kronsweide school. He was the first *Russlândia** teacher and was from the Mennonite Brethren Church at that. Mr. Cornelius Warkentin had

* Literally meaning "Russians," *Russlândia* became a name used for Mennonites who came to Canada from Russia in the 1920s. The Mennonites who were descendants of the first wave of immigration to Canada from Russia in the 1870s were known as *Kanadier* (Canadians). For more on the dynamics between the *Russlândia* and the *Kanadier*, see Chapter 15, "Beyond the Bergthaler Church."

studied in Moscow. Although he spoke with a distinct foreign accent he inspired us not only to work but to like it. Furthermore, he gave German a new place in the school. It had become virtually a forbidden language. During the day we always hid our German books and were allowed to use them only in the last half-hour for German instruction. Mr. Warkentin taught German songs anytime and even challenged our school inspector who came from England. When the inspector walked in one day, as they did at that time without knocking on the door, Mr. Warkentin asked us to rise and greet our guest with a Russian Volga song. Then we sang a German song and finally an English one. The inspector was very impressed. He saw that we had a progressive school and recognized that our school inspired children and expanded their horizons. Warkentin promoted me and another pupil from grade 7 to grade 8 and prepared us to write the departmental examinations in June. That was the year I began to look forward to more schooling.

Writing the grade 8 examinations in the Lowe Farm High School was an exciting experience. There were 14 grade 8 pupils from several schools. It was so good to be with others who were experiencing the same step forward into the world of thought. It was also great for me because Mother had made arrangements with her parents to have me eat my noon meal with them. For the whole week I had the honour of having the family car. In those days nobody had drivers' licenses. Agnes Rempel, the other pupil from the Kronsweide school, and I and our parents were proud that we were able to write the grade 8 departmental examinations. Only one pupil from our school had done that before. Our examinations were prepared by the Department of Education. A team of teachers corrected them.

Nervously I waited for my results. Mother seemed even more anxious than I. She was so proud that one of her children had written the exams. Every time the mail came we looked for the letter with the examination results. One day while I was washing after some field work she came behind me, pressed her thumb into my ribs and emotionally said, "Dü woascht ons Leara woare" (You will become our teacher). That important letter came only a few days later, but by then Mother had passed away. Her death and the Depression of the 1930s threw our family into an aimless existence which made further schooling impossible at that time.

From the time of Mother's death in 1930 until 1933, my life seemed meaningless. Our small farm did not supply enough work for the family. Money was very scarce, yet no one was encouraged to work

elsewhere. It seemed we needed to stay together. I began reading books which were floating around in the district. Most of my friends were reading Zane Grey-type western fiction and I began to like them too. I had to have a new book every day. Eventually I discovered other authors like Bruce Hutcherson. Then I learned about the University of Manitoba lending library and quickly became interested in books on agriculture. I researched better breeds of cattle and horses, crop rotation and soil enrichment. After my religious experience in 1933, my reading turned to Christian literature. I was especially attracted to missionary biographies and became quite knowledgeable about the world of missions. Naturally my focus was on so-called faith missions and not on Mennonite missions.

Circumstances forced me to wait with further schooling until I was on my own and no longer obligated to help support the family. That was not unusual at the time. In the summer of 1934 I worked for an English farmer for four months at a typical salary of \$20 per month. But because during the last month I had worked from 6:00 A.M. to 10:00 P.M., six days a week, I received a bonus of \$10, for a total of \$90 for the summer. Before I left the English district I used \$20 to pay off a debt made by another Mennonite. I thought I had to uphold the Mennonite virtue of honesty. When I came home Father shared with me some of his difficulties with the large family. The crop had been too meagre and the price of wheat too low to buy clothes for all. I gave him \$60. That left me with \$10 from my summer earnings. With the few dollars I had earned earlier I bought the clothes I needed. However, my dreams of attending Bible school had to be put on hold.

Beginning in 1936 I had six years of very enjoyable schooling. For the first three years I was at Elim Bible School. During the summers from 1936 to 1938 I worked on the Johann F. Giesbrecht farm. They had two older girls and a son who was a year older than I. That home gave me the warmth, love and security I had lost when Mother died. The three years of Bible school and the pleasant summers on the Giesbrecht farm were very therapeutic.

An important teacher for me at Elim was Mr. P. P. Tschetter, a pastor and evangelist from Kansas. He led us into healthy devotional exercises. Although academically he may not have been prepared to teach, he had a profound influence on us. He introduced me to General Conference Mennonite schools, missions and other institutions. For the second year a very gifted teacher, Mr. D. P. Esau, came to Elim from Bethany Bible School, the Mennonite Brethren school in Hep-

burn, Saskatchewan. He very effectively taught us how to lead Sunday School and preach sermons. I was very attracted to him at first, but gradually I began to dislike him, even despise him. He was a worshipper of Adolf Hitler and almost got me into legal difficulties.

Through P. P. Tschetter I began to consider further education. Eventually I even dreamed of going to Bluffton College. But that required high school. I took the first part of high school, grades 9 to 11, in Altona and not at Mennonite Collegiate Institute (MCI) in Gretna, partly because of finances, partly because I did not want to repeat the same religion classes I had taken in Bible school. The two years in Altona were very enjoyable. I allowed myself only eight months to take grades 9 and 10 but I learned a lot. That was my introduction to mathematics, algebra, trigonometry and geometry. At the end of the year I failed the grade 10 mathematics examination. The next year I tried to take both grade 10 and grade 11 mathematics at the same time and failed the grade 11 course. By that time I was 26 years old and thought I had to hurry. I knew Mr. Peters in Gretna was good in mathematics so in 1941 I enrolled at the MCI for grade 12. That was a great year except that I did not get along well with Mr. Esau. With his heavy emphasis on the German language and his ideological bias he began to symbolize the struggle between the Russian Mennonites called *Russlândia* and the Canadian-born Mennonites called *Kanadier*. One time we had a confrontation after someone had reported him to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) for his German activities. After that, our relationship was not very wholesome.

By then World War II was in its second year and began to affect my life more directly. Earlier I had been given my conscientious objector (CO) status at a court hearing in Morden. Now I was called to get my medical examination and given notice that I should be ready for a call to alternative service at any moment. Before taking my medical examination I informed the Selective Service Board that I would be willing to serve in some kind of medical unit without bearing arms. In my letter I wrote, "While Europe burns I don't feel good being safely tucked away in some forest project." The board did not accept me. When I took my medical I was declared unfit because of fallen arches. Even when I told the doctor I could walk 20 miles a day behind a harrow, he countered by saying that I would not be able to march five miles. That same doctor suggested I enlist and have a second examination. He was confident that I would be rejected, consequently would be rid of my CO status and any accompanying obligations. He said

there would be several benefits. I would no longer have to give so much money to the Red Cross and, after the war, I would be able to get government support for university training. My conscience would not allow me to go in that direction. In retrospect, I am glad events unfolded as they did.

My dream of going to Bluffton College after high school was not to be realized. I applied to teach school on permit as a form of alternative service to the military. Although obtaining that permit proved to be rather difficult due to the intense anti-Mennonite feelings in the Department of Education, I did get a school. I taught for one year at Deer Creek, south of Morden. I thought I had complied with all reporting regulations but I received a letter from the Alternative Service Board informing me that, if I did not reply immediately, the RCMP would be used to find me. Naturally I reported to the police and for a while all was well. However, at the end of the school year my permit was not renewed. I was to do alternative service on a pig farm in the Inter-Lake region. It was then that I applied to go into northern Manitoba to teach in a United Church Indian school. It seemed that my formal student years were over. Bluffton was no longer visible on my horizon. It had disappeared and it never reappeared.

Many years later, after our return from Mexico and a year of teaching at Elim Bible School, I studied for one year at Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) in Winnipeg. During the mid 1950s I had the opportunity to take another spring term at CMBC. Then in 1960 we spent several months at Mennonite Biblical Seminary (MBS) in Elkhart, Indiana, where I participated in its summer program. In 1967-68 I took a full year at the Seminary. The dean graciously considered my earlier work at the Missionary Medical Institute, the Wycliffe Summer Institute of Linguistics, the four terms at CMBC, and offered me a program that would allow me to finish MBS with a summer program plus one full year at the school. With my heavy workload as pastor at the Altona Bergthaler Church, the writing of the central Bergthaler Church history and our anticipated termination in Altona, that plan never materialized.

4

Through the Valley of Despair

It began as an ordinary hot summer day, July 13, 1930. The early morning sun pointed to another scorching day that would see sickly looking shoots of wheat, barley and oats struggling for the moisture which had come only recently. After years of drought and grasshopper infestations, the Lowe Farm-area farmers were once again breathing more easily. It seemed they might have a better crop. My Sunday morning chores were quite routine. I had fed and brushed our horses, Jim and Jin, Charley and Minus. Sisters Mary and Sara had milked the cows, Stiern, Bunti, Whitti and Bessy, and had prepared breakfast.

Breakfast in the dirty-thirties was no great luxury. It was either oatmeal or bread and butter (which might be lard) with plum jam. We did not know about all the fancy dry cereals that came on the market later. We were familiar with Kellogg's Corn Flakes but it was too expensive for the poor farmer of those lean years. Bacon and eggs were not part of a Mennonite breakfast menu. We knew the *Enjelända* ate such foods but then, they were different. Our eggs were for supper time, although in those years most had already been committed to our Jewish merchants in exchange for such staples as salt, sugar, Roger's Golden Syrup and postage stamps.

I cannot recall how many of our family were in the Sommerfelder Church that morning. Some of us will have been there. Attending church service was as routine for us as doing the morning and evening chores. Mother may not have attended, although none of us remember that she was not well. In those days women's problems, and especially

pregnancies, were not discussed within hearing distance of children. It seems, however, that sister Mary should have known if Mother had been ill but she didn't remember anything unusual.

The afternoon must have been quite uneventful since nothing about it comes to mind. We did no other work on Sundays than was necessary for the welfare of farm livestock. Later that afternoon our parents' friends and next door neighbours, Cornelius Gerbrandts, came over to visit. So also did the Martin Friesens from a mile-and-a-half east of our farm. As was customary, Mother served supper. In those days friends came uninvited, even for main meals. It seems to me she prepared the traditional visitors' supper of fried potatoes and eggs. That, plus milk with rice or some kind of fruit *Mooss* (a sweet fruit soup) was always a good supper.

Some in the family suggest that Mother had shown some discomfort during the evening. The visitors left about ten and our parents took a leisurely walk to the back of our yard to look at the crop in an adjacent field. When they came back Mother sat down in the granary doorway, apparently to rest or let a wave of pain pass. The granary floor was about 18 inches from the ground. It soon became evident that she was not well, then became violently ill.

We did not have a government telephone at the time. Ours was a private phone, called a farmer's phone, that served approximately 22 subscribers. The usual route to the outside world for us was to call Henry Groenings who had a second private phone. They would convey the message to Abram Groenings, who then would transmit the message via their government phone. When Mother became ill Father tried to use the phone to reach Dr. Rudolf Klassen, a new immigrant in Morris. That evening one link did not function. The Henry Groenings did not answer. Then Father drove to Jacob Schroeders, two miles toward Lowe Farm, and tried to reach Dr. Klassen from there. But there was no answer. Finally, Father reached Dr. McGavin of Plum Coulee, the family doctor of the community. He was a very devout sacrificial doctor but with somewhat limited medical education.

Dr. McGavin came to see Mother as soon as possible. He prescribed medicine, possibly his small yellow pills which he used for a wide variety of ailments. They probably were somewhat better than Alpenkreuter, that liquid cure-all which one could purchase from the Watkins dealer. According to folklore both remedies could be helpful—unless a person was actually seriously ill. And Mother was very sick.

Through the long dark night, though nights in July are not long, Mother's condition deteriorated steadily. She experienced attack after attack of convulsions. She bit her tongue badly, causing it to swell far out of proportion. While she was still able to talk she told us how serious it was and asked us children to pray for her. She also asked us to make our decisions for the Lord and the church.

After midnight Father drove to the government telephone once more and called Dr. McGavin. I recall so vividly how sister Helena and I posted ourselves outside the house and looked toward Plum Coulee. I still know the spot where we stood. It seemed as if our intense gaze into the night in a southwesterly direction literally pulled Dr. McGavin toward our yard. Finally we saw a dim car light approaching. Very slowly it crept closer and, yes, it was Dr. McGavin. He went immediately into the sickroom and found Mother totally beyond his help. When he emerged from the room he solemnly told Father and the rest of us that she would die shortly. It seems to me she died around 10 in the morning, about twelve hours after her illness struck.

According to Dr. Klassen, who was consulted later, Mother's uncontrollable convulsions came from a toxic complication from her pregnancy. The doctor volunteered that, if she had been able to get to the hospital in Morris, he might have been able to help her. Without the treatment of a competent gynaecologist in a good hospital her illness had been fatal from the outset. But Dr. Klassen had not been available and his kind words did nothing to mitigate our pain.

Mother was dead and she was no pretty sight. In her desperate struggle with the convulsions she had bitten herself so badly that there was blood all over. And we were so alone, desperately alone. Slowly neighbours, friends and Mother's parents and sisters came. Although much of the discussion was out of my earshot, I do recall their conversations regarding preparation of the body for burial. Grandmother wanted Mother to be dressed in white, a garment of righteousness to appear before God. Father insisted she had discarded the traditional Mennonite dress and church bonnet and should be dressed as she had been for church services. Mrs. Peter K. Rempel was widely known for her skill in preparing bodies for burial. She was engaged to do this for Mother.

Preserving a body was difficult before the era of the undertaker. Usually the body was packed in some ice. This time someone came up with the brilliant suggestion of digging a temporary grave under the trees in our garden and placing the coffin in it. The next few days

turned out to be very hot with fierce thunderstorms. By the time the coffin was opened on the day of the funeral, decomposition had begun and the body was badly bloated. The coffin was closed quickly, but that last sight of Mother haunted especially us children.

It was a sad trip to church. Again Henry Groening's Reo car was used. This time the top was lowered, as could be done on the touring cars of that day, and the coffin was placed across it. I remember very little about the funeral and burial. I do recall the traditional coffee and buns served on our yard after the service. I also remember not understanding the apparent indifference of our friends and neighbours to our tragedy. Some laughed rather raucously, used rough language and smoked. Perhaps I found their behaviour so objectionable on that day because Mother had been so clear concerning such language and smoking. She taught that it was sinful behaviour which we were not to do.

Our family deeply mourned Mother's death. We had developed a tradition in our home that, whenever a thunderstorm struck at night, the whole family would get up, dress and gather together. A day or two after the funeral a thunderstorm awakened us. That was a sad night. The lightening flashed and thunder rolled. But we hardly noticed. In our thoughts we weren't there. We were with Mother. We realized in a most graphic way that our family circle had been broken forever. Sister Mary recalls our first breakfast after Mother's death. When we had gathered in the summer kitchen Jake, aged nine, noticed the broken circle, and innocently but ominously commented, "Well, now we have one less chair to get to the table." Instead of sitting down to eat, we all began to wail. As Manitoba was celebrating its 60th anniversary we were grieving bitterly. As Winnipeggers gathered in large numbers to hear Prime Minister William Lyon McKenzie King turn over Manitoba's natural resources to the provincial government, we had our heads together and could think only of what we had lost.

Father especially found that a difficult time. Our Gerbrandt clan does not show emotions easily. Father, who had always been rather stoical and prided himself on not showing pain easily, now was suffering deeply. He could not cry. He was like stone. Mother's Mother accused him of not crying for his wife. She even suggested he might be interested in other women. But Father's mourning ran much deeper than grieving over the loss of his wife whom he had loved dearly. Never have any of the children suspected him of anything else. The most painful part of his mourning was remorse. He felt guilty. He had

been a legalistic, staunch Sommerfelder chorister and strict churchman in whom there appeared no guile. He had a well behaved family and a good church record. But Father had suppressed all different expressions of faith, even the deepest spiritual yearnings and invitations. He had prevented Mother from attending other religious services more often.

Even before her marriage to Father, Mother had attended the *Jugendverein* services in Lowe Farm and had encouraged her family to participate as well. Mary also remembers Mother's spiritual concern for her when she attended catechism classes. In the evenings Mother sat with her on the floor beside the brooding machine to explain the questions and answers to her. The lamp in the brooder provided the light for reading the catechism. During the term of one of the Kronsweide school teachers, a *Jugendverein* was started and our parents attended it several times. However, Father simply was not ready. As late as 1928, two years before her death, Mother had told her sisters Agatha and Aganetha of her desire to participate in the Bible studies led by Henry S. Schellenberg in Rosefarm. Aunt Nettie shared that with me many years later when she was on her death bed in an Abbotsford hospital.



My "orphaned" family in mourning shortly after Mother's death in 1930 (back row, from left): Helena, Sara, Diedrich, Jake, Mary, Henry; (front row): Peter, John and Ed.

Before Father could come to terms with his grief and remorse, he had to make things right with God. He began to look for spiritual meaning and direction. We attended special evangelistic meetings and deeper life services in the Lowe Farm Bergthaler Church. I don't know whether Father made one particular commitment to Christ. But he became a spiritual man. His life changed. I recall one evening after we came home from deeper life services led by David Schulz and William P. Heinrichs. I had been touched by their sermons. I told Father, "If ever I join a church, it shall be this one." Father replied, "That is what I was hoping." Earlier he never would have said that.

Father had sorted out his own relationship to Christ, but one gnawing question remained: had Mother been a Christian when she died, or was she lost? That doubt became a monster in the milieu of a strong emphasis at that time on a decisive, radical conversion experience. The whole revival movement, whether it came through Los Angeles teacher Henry S. Schellenberg, or through Lloyd Hunter of the Canadian Sunday School Mission, or evangelists in Lowe Farm Bergthaler Church, all stressed the need for a sudden conversion experience. In light of that emphasis, could it be, Father worried, that Mother had died an unsaved person? That fear threatened to destroy him.

Many years later Father confided in brother Diedrich how only gradually he had been able to sort out this dilemma. The key was a flashback to an incident where Mother had disciplined us when we were still small. We had been disobedient. She squatted down on the floor with us and lectured us. Among other things she said, "Jesus is my shepherd and I am your shepherd. As I try to obey my shepherd so you must obey me." That memory conveyed to Father a new understanding of the Christian faith. Jesus had taught that he was the shepherd and we were his sheep. If Jesus had been Mother's shepherd, then she had belonged to him. So surely Jesus, her shepherd, would have taken her safely into his fold. That insight ended his doubts. Besides that, it was good Anabaptist theology.

The years after Mother's death were aggravated by the poverty which the Depression imposed on us. The surprising thing was that none of us children had even heard that we were poor. But things just fell apart with Mother gone. Sister Mary was loaded down with the responsibilities of looking after the family, planning the meals with very few resources and getting the children clothed. Although the crops were not that bad, prices were very low. The days were also dark because of Father's long periods of deep remorse. Mary shared later

that there were times when she had been afraid Father would break down or even destroy himself.

It was also during those years that I found life empty and meaningless. Since I was the oldest boy on the farm, I did most of the chores throughout the year and much of the field work in summer. The work was enjoyable but life felt so empty. I did a lot of riding with several neighbour boys, but did not look forward to the evenings of conversation and entertainment. The activities were always the same. The fellows played cards, smoked and told dirty stories about girls, or relived the latest Zane Grey cowboy story. But it is strange how my memory has completely blocked out our home life of those years.

In the fall of 1932 I took my first job away from home. I pitched sheaves on the Peter Penner farm two-and-a-half miles west of our place. I had already worked 17 days with Father's team, hauling sheaves for a communal threshing company. I believe I had earned \$15. The work with the Penner threshing outfit was extremely hard for me. I was 16 years old, rather light in weight, and those durum wheat sheaves were bulky, long and heavy. My first half-day seemed endless. I had an early morning breakfast at home, walked the two-and-a-half miles to the Penner farm, and by noon I was exhausted and famished.

And then came the big shock. I had just washed up and sat down at the table when one of the Penner sons-in-law announced rather mischievously, "Yesterday two big events happened in Plum Coulee: John Wiebe cut his throat, and Jacob Gerbrandt from Lowe Farm came to Plum Coulee to announce officially that he would marry Mrs. Cornelius Giesbrecht." For me that was a thunderbolt out of the blue. We children had often played the dating game among ourselves. We had chosen one of Aunt Anna's friends as a suitable wife for Father. She had often been at Grandfather's home and we liked her. She could be a replacement for our Mother. Whether Father had ever heard of our choice is doubtful. Sister Mary claims Father had confided in her regarding his marriage plans. The rest of us did not know and I was devastated. I cannot remember how I finished the day, how long I worked there, nor how much I had earned. I remember only one thing: I did not like Mrs. Giesbrecht.

Susanna Giesbrecht was a beautiful woman, a widow whose husband had died the same year Mother died. She was the mother of ten children ranging in age from eight to 25 years. Two were married, three were supposed to move in with us and the other five had already moved away from home. Father had known her through the Sommerfelder

Church although I could not recall ever having seen her. Mrs. Giesbrecht was a fine Christian woman and wanted to be our mother, but she immediately ran into a serious obstacle. We were hard to win over. We thought Father had made a serious mistake and, to this day, that earlier resistance is hard to overcome.

Bringing the two families together was a monumental task. Our Gerbrandt clan was and, to this day, is rather close knit. We tend to stick together. Most of us are rather stoical in temperament and usually don't divulge more than is necessary. When we are hurt we tend to keep it to ourselves. We handle things in our own way, and seldom does anyone apologize. Our new mother and her clan were the opposite. They talked very freely and were not as close as a family. We decided immediately that they must have had a very worldly upbringing. They had different tastes in food and clothing and several of the boys smoked. We were used to having syrup or jam on bread when we had "crackles" in the morning. They put sugar into rice. Two of the girls claimed to have boyfriends.

On the day of the wedding we met the whole Giesbrecht clan for the first time. There were no formal introductions. By evening we had no idea who our new sisters and brothers were and who their friends were. I discovered later that a joint family picture had been taken but I don't even remember that. It seemed to us that there were more boyfriends than available girls, and more girlfriends than available boys. While one fellow was with his girl, another rather recklessly drove his horse and buggy around the house and over the sidewalk from the house to the summer kitchen. After a long evening, during which the Gerbrandts were like meek and bewildered sheep without a shepherd, most of them left for their own places of employment. The rest of us had to sort out where to sleep in a house that did not have enough beds and rooms. Our castle had been invaded and turned into a small, crowded house. We felt we no longer had a home. I was hurt and frustrated.

That first encounter drew the Gerbrandt peas even more closely to each other in their naive, cultural shell. We assumed we had to protect each other. Thus, Mother had a united foe to overcome. Father had not counted the cost, or at least had not thought through a strategy to win his own children away from their fond, highly fabled memories of their deceased mother to accept this new mother. How carefully the follow-up actions were planned has never been discussed with our parents. But the stress in the home was obvious and something had to be done.



The Gerbrandt-Giesbrecht families at the time of Father's second marriage to Susanna Giesbrecht (back row, from left): Henry J. Gerbrandt, Peter Giesbrecht, Jacob Giesbrecht, Frank Thiessen, Cornelius Giesbrecht, Peter Reimer, John C. Giesbrecht; (middle row): Tina Giesbrecht, Susan Giesbrecht Thiessen, Lena Giesbrecht, Mary Gerbrandt, Helena Gerbrandt, Mary Giesbrecht Reimer, Sara Gerbrandt; (front row): Jacob Gerbrandt, Diedrich Gerbrandt, Henry Giesbrecht, John J. Gerbrandt, Susanna Giesbrecht Gerbrandt, Jacob P. Gerbrandt, Peter Gerbrandt, Ed Gerbrandt, Agnes Giesbrecht.

It appears the new couple thought they had to find the culprit responsible for tension and remove him or her. That culprit was our deceased mother who, by that time, had become a saint in our eyes. They tried to erase all memories of her. Her pictures disappeared, her wedding china was given away and all references to her disappeared. For some reason our Lowe Farm aunts and uncles, Mother's sisters and brothers, ceased coming to our place. Not only had Mother died, now even the memory of her seemed to have vanished. Only a vacuum remained and our new mother wanted so badly to fill it.

For sisters Mary and Sara the escape was easy. Both were madly in love and busily planning their own marriages. In fact, Mary's wedding had to be postponed several weeks because of Father's wedding. Sara too was planning to get married in 1933. I left home as soon as possible to work and study. The younger boys may have suffered less. They soon discovered Mother also had love for them. It may have been hardest for sister Helena. She had to work at home. She now had seven younger siblings to look after. Helena has always been an extremely accommodating person, and the tensions, the pressures and the need for mediation produced qualities that have been the envy of many.

Both second as well as first marriages are made up of two partners. But second marriages often involve two families. Our Gerbrandt family was almost totally blind to the suffering of the Giesbrecht family. We had a home and it remained a home—at least a house. They had lost a home. Furthermore, we held together but, because they lived so separately before the marriage, they were hardly a family. Their mother had not been able to support them. What to us seemed like laziness when they did not help us with our farm chores can easily be explained as non-involvement. Our farm, buildings and stock were part of us. That's not how it was for them. With their father's death they had lost everything: farm, house and togetherness.

Years later I drew interesting lessons from that experience. I advised couples entering second marriages to involve their respective families in decision making. I tried to help them see that memories of the deceased partners are a sacred trust and are to be respected. A new love relationship may go well for the spouse but he or she cannot take for granted that the children also have been prepared. I have tried to tell partners in a second marriage that their combined family memories can become part of the new home. Instead of destroying past memories, if respected and treasured, they can be a source of enrichment to the new combined family.

After the children were all grown up and had established homes of their own, our parents found a deep love for each other. During the 1940s farm income increased and home expenses decreased. Our parents sold the farm, built a home in Altona and enjoyed a very beautiful retirement. All the children, both Giesbrechts and Gerbrandts, enjoyed visits in the parental home and the large family gatherings. Naturally, it became more and more difficult for them to keep track of all the grandchildren that came from 18 households. Both parents died suddenly, Mother in 1963 and Father in 1964. Father had made one last attempt to keep the family united. In his will he directed that all his remaining assets be evenly divided into 19 parts and that all children were to be treated equally.

Already before our parents died they found it impossible to accommodate the whole combined clan, children and grandchildren, in their home. That called for summer gatherings on children's yards or community parks. The tradition was maintained after our parents died but eventually, as we grew older, it became increasingly more difficult. A few years ago the next generation took over. The first gathering was called the Giesbrandt-Gerbrecht gathering. Every detail had been planned and carried out by the grandchildren of our parents. It was a very beautiful experience. The union which began under a blanket of heavy clouds in 1932 has lasted. Today (April 1994), only three of the ten Giesbrecht children who came into the marriage are still alive. Five of the nine Gerbrandt children who came into the union have passed away. The combined living descendants count several hundred. God did bless the union. Although at times the valley appeared dark, sanity, harmony and love prevailed. God blessed the faithfulness and prayers of our parents beyond expectation.

5

Spiritual Journey

My forebears migrated to Canada from Russia in 1875. They came from the Bergthal settlement, a daughter colony of Chortitza. The majority of those immigrants settled in the East Reserve.* The final group in this immigration wave came in 1876 and settled in the West Reserve. Much of the land in the East Reserve was poor and stony so, when given the opportunity, many of the earlier homesteaders came to the West Reserve. They settled in the Altona vicinity beginning around 1880. In the East Reserve the people used the name Chortitz for their settlement and church; in the West Reserve they took the name Bergthaler after their colony in Russia. Among the people who moved to the West Reserve after 1880 were my maternal and paternal grandparents. That placed them into the camp of the general Bergthaler Church. The church register for the years 1881 to 1893 uses the name *Gemeinde zu West Lynn*.

In Russia the Bergthal people had steered a course quite separate from that of the other colonies and church groups. Through isolation they had escaped the influence of land, social and educational reforms. They also had not been touched significantly by the spiritual renewal movements which swept through the churches in the Chortitza and Molotschna regions. One example was the development of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860. The Bergthalers considered many of the renewal experiences rather divisive and excessive. James Urry maintains that one reason for their emigration from Russia was to

* See Chapter 1, note 1 for a description of the reserves.

escape the influences of those religious and social convulsions. In Manitoba they continued the practice of building barriers against new insights and experiences. It appears that the leadership was intent on preserving the old forms.

In 1892-93 Bishop Johann Funk of Alt-Bergthal, west of Altona, spearheaded a renewal program in the West Reserve. He emphasized a devoted Christian life, youth and children's work, special evangelistic activities, mission outreach and relating to other Mennonites, more specifically, with the General Conference Mennonite Church of the United States. Since 1885 Funk had associated with a group of progressive leaders who had established the Mennonite Educational Institute in Gretna. His leadership and call for renewal must have been threatening, or at least not understood. It precipitated a split in the Mennonite church community of the West Reserve. The vast majority of church adherents left Funk. He remained with a small group of 61 families and only one church building but they retained the name Bergthaler. Most of the members regrouped, called their own bishop and took the name Sommerfelder. Both my paternal and maternal grandparents were part of the group which formed the Sommerfelder Church.

The Kronsweide settlement was largely Sommerfelder. As I mentioned earlier, two families, the Cornelius Driedgers and the Albert Karlenzigs, attended the Bergthaler services in Lowe Farm, although the Karlenzigs had a Baptist-Mennonite Brethren background. In addition, several families did not attend church at all.

The Sommerfelder people of that community were deeply religious. It is sometimes claimed that their ministers did not preach the Gospel, but I find that their old sermon books clearly outline new life in Jesus Christ. However, their traditional approach to delivering sermons presented a problem. Sermons were read and, in most cases, in a rather monotonous manner. One of their ministers, William Friesen of Rosenheim, was a glaring exception. He preached fire and brimstone and delivered his sermons so forcefully that the congregation was brought to tears. I recall how even the big boys, who always assembled in the back pews, broke down when he preached. The emotions of the moment may have brought tears but they were not always signs of repentance. On the more humorous side, some fellows were very careful to allow their tears to fall on one spot on the floor, then point to the little puddles later.

The preaching was inadequate, not because it did not call people to

repentance and to Christ, but because it did not lead people to a decision which gave them assurance of salvation. The preachers consistently challenged people to be faithful in this life as they passed through this “vale of tears.” Such a morbid approach to life was not attractive to the young people. Although the Kronsweide Sommerfelder believed in Christ, they dared not confess that they were Christians. To do so would be considered boastful or proud. They claimed their lives were their testimony. If asked whether one was a Christian, the answer might very well be, “Ask my neighbour.” The people lived with the hope that they were God’s children and would be received by God at death. Anyone who dared express confidence in salvation was dubbed a Mennonite Brethren and had to be watched.

Generally the people took their Christian walk seriously, at least up to a point. They were in no way legalistic pietists. Smoking, drinking alcohol, playing cards, dancing and using rather crude language, though not desirable, were part of life. However, in our home those practices were considered sin. That created some serious problems for me in my youth activities in the community. It may be that Mother’s exposure to Bergthaler Church influences in Lowe Farm had sensitized her against such behaviour. Mother also had come in contact with excessive alcohol through her Father’s drinking problem. Father came from a disciplined pious family where tobacco and alcohol were frowned upon. My parental standards planted in me inhibitions which kept me from indulging freely and made it that much easier to change later.

Mother also may have been influenced through her work at the Jacob Heppners who had been in contact with the Everts of Gretna. At one time Heppner was chairman of the MEI board. Their daughter Marie had studied music with Mrs. Benjamin Ewert and their son Diedrich had attended the MEI. It was through the Heppner connection that H. H. Ewert helped the Lowe Farm Sunday School get established. From Aunt Nettie and Aunt Sarah I know that Mother had attended *Jugendverein* in Lowe Farm. Whatever the reasons, Mother heard a different drummer and cautioned us about participating in activities that were not wholesome. Although both she and Father had participated in dances before, and even after their marriage, by the time I was old enough to remember they had withdrawn and Father refused to play the old waltzes. Only once, after much urging from us, did we hear him play a waltz on sister Mary’s accordion.

Father and Mother were strict adherents of the Sommerfelder

Church and traditions. In Father's memoirs he draws attention to his parents' regular church attendance which influenced him from childhood on. In those days small children who could not yet sit still or who might cause unnecessary disturbances did not attend. There were no children's activities and the sermons were geared strictly to adults. My brother Diedrich recalls how Mother pushed him below the pew to slap his hand when he misbehaved. Only years later did the Sommerfelder Church introduce children and youth instruction classes. Naturally it had always conducted annual catechism classes in preparation for baptism.

When I step back into my childhood world and look at those adults of Kronsweide, I grow nostalgic. They were honest and genuine, albeit somewhat uncouth. In our Low German one might call them *prost* (crude). I can still hear them singing their slow, chanting, Gregorian-style chorales on Sunday mornings. One of the *Vorsänger* (choristers) would announce the number twice, read the first line of the chorale, then lead out in the singing. We had a number of outstanding female singers who would then pick up the tune and drown out the chorister. They included the three Ewert sisters, Mrs. Cornelius Gerbrandt, Mrs. Peter K. Rempel and Mrs. Peter Penner, as well as Mrs. Aron Thiessen and Mrs. Bernard Funk. Their nasal, shrill voices could be heard far from the church. They sang well and everyone appreciated their good leadership.

Father was one of the choristers, thus making it necessary for me to sit by myself. He would place me about eight pews from the front and keep one eye on me, the other on his hymn book. One retired chorister no longer sat on the choristers' pew but on the bench right up against the platform facing the congregation. Every Sunday morning he had to clear out a rusty throat. I believe that noisy ritual was observed by all the choristers. "Old Peter Rempel" was unique in that he could accurately direct his spit into the spittoon several feet away. I admired him and the other choristers for their accuracy—at least I hope it was! The church custodian will have known for sure. I made up my mind that I would spit that way when I grew up.

When I got older I was permitted to sit with the big boys. Naturally, I was still under the watchful eye of Father. In our church the big boys sat in the last pews on the north side of the church and the big girls sat on the front pews on the south side. Male and female worshippers were very strictly separated. That made it awkward for young couples who planned to get married on Sunday morning during or immediately after

the church service. The groom and bride would have to sit separately until their part in the service came. Then someone would place two chairs in front of the pulpit and the minister would invite those wishing to be married that morning to sit on those chairs. A story is told that one Sunday, when the minister called up those who wanted to be married, one man and three women stepped forward. That story will need to remain folklore; it would lose its charm through research.

I recall one particular Sunday morning when it was stifling hot. One of our most senior choristers prolonged the service. To break the monotony, one of the bigger boys decided to open a window to get some fresh air. While getting up from his kneeling position after prayer, he swung around and quickly pushed up on the window. Alas, the wood was already somewhat decayed and the top part of the frame came off. It was an innocent act, yet a number of boys laughed. Then one of the choristers called out loudly and clearly, “Wää enn e Kjoakj lacht jeit no dee Hal” (Anyone who laughs in church goes to hell). That was a strong and unfortunate accusation. No one meant wrong, especially not the fellow who opened the window. I don’t recall being reprimanded after we got home from church. Father saw what had happened and understood that it seemed funny to us. The young man who caused the commotion, John Friesen, was a serious fellow who later became my brother-in-law and bishop of the Sommerfelder Church.

We fellows in the back pews regularly had a welcome interruption during the morning sermon. One of the choristers would wait until the sermon was about half finished, then place his hand on a long chain that was attached to a button hole of his vest, pull his watch from his vest pocket, look at it carefully with a slight side glance with one eye partially closed, slip it back, get up and start to walk down the steps of the choristers’ platform. That was the boys’ cue to bow their heads, close their eyes and start counting his footsteps. Every Sunday, precisely on the seventeenth step we would hear the heavy door latch click, the hinges creak and our good chorister was on his way to . . . Well, how could we know? But fortunately, usually one of the fellows would also feel the call of nature and leave the church. Our punctual chorister did not visit the biffy nor go into the horse barn — he went behind the barn. There he took a few puffs on a cigarette held by a long straight stem. After finishing it he would return to church and solemnly take his place with his fellow choristers. He was a good and honest man—that was simply part of his Sunday ritual.

After the German service the minister would frequently admonish us young people in Low German. He would warn us against the prevailing evils of society (*die Welt*). They included baseball, hockey, football, alcohol and dancing. I recall walking out of the church one morning and whispering to a friend, "He forgot about sledding down the snow bank." I could well understand his warning about dancing and alcohol. That was in keeping with our training at home. However, I never understood his warning against baseball. Even Father and Grandfather loved to watch, and even cheer vigorously, when the Lowe Farm baseball team played. Later in my teen years I was permitted to take a horse and, even during seeding time, ride to the place where we played baseball.

Although the church services were not inspiring for a child or youth, they pointed to faith in Christ and discipleship. That was exemplified in the way communion was approached. The Lord's Supper was understood as a reconciliation meal. People faithfully and honestly attempted to clear up any misunderstandings prior to communion so they were ready for being at the Lord's table. The Sunday preceding communion was called Preparation Sunday and included an appropriate sermon. One incident is indelibly etched in my memory. On a summer evening when our garden was soaked with a drenching rain and the vegetables were lush and waiting to be brought to the table, a neighbour's herd of about 15 cows left the pasture and spent the night helping themselves to the cabbage and walking over the whole garden looking for more. The garden was practically ruined. I suppose when Father phoned the neighbour his message was somewhat forceful. Several weeks later, on the Saturday before communion, there was a knock at our door early in the morning. When Mother answered, there was our neighbour with a humble apology, asking for forgiveness. Mother kindly accepted his apology but, when she came back to the breakfast table, she ruefully acknowledged, "I would have preferred a bag of cabbage." Nevertheless, they could have communion together and the incident was not mentioned again. Preparation Sunday and communion were great aids to the spiritual welfare of our community. Christmas services were the highlights of the year for me. Annually we would sing "Lobt Gott, ihr Christen allzugleich" (Praise God, you Christians altogether). As a rule I also found the Christmas sermon interesting.

Although the joy of salvation and the assurance of forgiveness were not preached, I believe the majority of people from my childhood years

believed firmly in Jesus Christ and hoped to be in heaven after death. The epitaphs on their tombstones in the Kronsweide cemetery speak beautifully to that hope. My heart still grows warm when I walk across that cemetery today and recall those coarse, sturdy, warm-hearted pioneers. There I meet once more the women whose shrill, nasal singing still awakens a glow within me. There are the Aron Thiessens who fought so valiantly to keep the school German. There is my Father's best friend, Peter P. Rempel, who introduced him to his girlfriend and later sang a chorale for him at the funeral home. There is Bernard Hildebrand whose embellished experiences brought forward many a smile.

As I look at the memorial stones, Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" comes to mind.

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me. . . .

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. . . .

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heaven did a recompense as largely send;
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend.

No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)
The bosom of his Father and his God.

However, one grave in that cemetery disturbs me and brings back a feeling of guilt. One of the men from our district had a serious problem with alcohol. He fought it courageously but, apparently, lost the battle. That is what we thought. He died on a trip home from his brother's place in Haywood in western Manitoba. We fellows who always dug the graves assumed he had died drunk. We decided to bury him a foot deeper than normal so that Satan would not be able to get him as easily. Only later we learned that he had a deep conversion experience while with his brother and had died a forgiven man. I am glad we were not his final judge.

Although I respect the religious seriousness of the church people of my childhood, I admit that a deep malaise had crept into the church

and the leadership did not realize the need for renewal and reform. For too long they had held on to a religiosity which had lost its vitality and meaning. Their sermons, though good, had been copied through the generations and had lost their effectiveness. The wineskin had become too brittle to adjust to new wine. They could not hold the new wine that began to ferment. When renewal finally did come, many good aspects of the Sommerfelder faith and church life were thoughtlessly and even deliberately swept away.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s spiritual renewal movements swept in from various sources. Bible studies were held in the Rosefarm school conducted by H. S. Schellenberg, a graduate of Los Angeles Bible Institute. Special evangelistic services were conducted by P.P. Tschetter, the General Conference minister from Kansas, and Isaak P. Friesen, the evangelist from Rosthern. And annual week-long evangelistic services sponsored by the Bergthaler Church were held in Lowe Farm and in most of the district schools. Although those men, except Schellenberg, were mostly invited by the Bergthaler Church, large numbers of Sommerfelder people attended and the services became part of the total Mennonite experience in those communities. Out of the renewal movements arose the Rudnerweider Mennonite Church (now called Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference).

My parents, that is, Father and his second wife, were swept along with the renewal movement. For a time they attended services in the Lowe Farm Bergthaler Church but became convinced that those were not their people. For the time being, the Kronsweide Sommerfelder Church remained home. However, when the Rudnerweider Church was born and built a church in nearby Rosefarm, they made the move. In 1938 Father became a minister in the Rudnerweider Church and remained active until his death in 1964.

For many years the wall between the Sommerfelder and the Rudnerweider groups was very high. Today the Sommerfelder people have a good understanding of what happened. Consequently, new expressions of the Christian faith are expressed more fully in their congregations as well. During his retirement Father reflected back on those earlier years. He valued what had happened. He noted that the Rudnerweider Church was gradually becoming less judgemental and the Sommerfelder Church was becoming more open to renewal. He said, "If that would have happened years ago, the split need not have come about." Perhaps, yet at the time it seemed so inevitable.

Several forms developed which were accepted as suitable and more

open expressions of the new spiritual awareness and joy the movement had produced. One of them was the rural *Jugendverein*, often called Christian Endeavour program. Churches like the Lowe Farm Berghthaler Church had them from their beginnings. But the rural gatherings were more spontaneous. Father was instrumental in organizing one in the Kronsweide school. Those monthly evening gatherings allowed people like my parents to witness to faith, victory, joys and sorrows. They shared their faith journeys and gave testimony to Christ. Although it was to be a long time before women were recognized as public speakers, our new mother was not inhibited from presenting well worked-out biblical experiences or scriptural insights. Father took his first steps in preaching. Young people began to share and tell children's stories, recite poetry and join together to bring musical or instrumental selections.

However, those developments were not without their tensions and unexpectedly threw an ominous cloud over Father's enthusiasm. Not only did Father's Sommerfelder friends not share his excitement, but several close friends actively opposed his efforts. They advocated that the Kronsweide school be closed for all religious activities except those which the teacher had with his pupils. They maintained it was too expensive to heat the school in winter for an extra evening. When Father supplied the fuel, other objections were raised.

I recall one informal meeting in our yard on a beautiful summer evening. Five or six men had gathered. Some spoke for the *Jugendverein*; others spoke against it. A heated verbal confrontation developed. One man accused Father of having started the *Jugendverein* so that his daughters might find and associate with their boyfriends. We are still proud of Father's cautious response. He said, "I did not start the *Jugendverein* for that purpose, but if my daughters happen to find their boyfriends there, I will be extremely happy." Then one man accused another, "You have always been against religious activities." That was too harsh and not correct. The answer came quickly, "If I felt better physically, we would settle this accusation behind the barn." The matter was not settled nor resolved.

A small group remained opposed to having the public school used for religious activities. They went to see Diedrich Heppner, the farmer-businessman, who usually acted as lawyer and mediator in disputes. They asked him to make their wish known to government officials. His answer was abrupt and harsh: "You people came to this country to seek religious freedom for yourselves and your children. You asked

for that special privilege in your request to the government. Now, in turn, you want to deny that freedom to your fellow believers. You are a disgrace to this community. Go back home and stop making trouble.” That was the end of the controversy. After a while the district settled into its former harmony. The most interesting footnote to that experience came several years later when one of Father’s strongest opponents spoke highly of Father’s faith and confessed that he had it too.

At one point, four adjacent rural districts each had *Jugendverein* once a month. The young people who wanted that kind of fellowship spent Sunday evenings visiting and participating in its various meetings. Numerous friendships developed and marriages followed. Father’s old friend from the Sommerfelder Church, Rev. Jacob Schroeder, accepted invitations to speak at the Kronsweide evening program. Schroeder’s problem was that his book of sermons had been developed for a different type of program and was from a different time. His sermons were so long that he literally drove young people out of the school. But for Father his presence was balm for the soul. It meant so much to him that the local Sommerfelder minister, the man who had officiated at his first marriage, supported that new venture. It seems to me that, if the ministers of the Sommerfelder Church in the so-called reserve areas had been as understanding, the rift in the Sommerfelder Church would not have been necessary.

My journey into the mood and culture of the *Jugendverein* was not so easy. My friends tended not to be part of it. There was a period of time after Mother’s death when I drifted from place to place without finding the satisfaction for which I longed. I was confused. I recall one cold winter evening three years after Mother had died. It was 1933 and I was 17 years old. I was on a desolate country road walking toward home two-and-a-half miles away. The stars shone brightly in a cloudless sky. I had time to reflect on the emptiness of life since Mother had passed away. Father had gone through months of depression and frustration before he had found meaning in a new revitalized faith. I still needed something. Although I could not formulate it, I was longing for meaningful youth fellowship.

The evening, still young, had begun as many before. A group of youth people from Rosefarm, Melba and Kronsweide had gathered in the home of Isaak Friesen. The purpose was to dance. There was some alcohol present, although no one seemed to be under its influence. Cornelius Harder, later minister in the Rudnerweider Church, was one of the musicians. Peter Dueck, later my brother-in-law, was as lifeless

as I. Then in came exuberant, carefree Daniel Blatz. His friends wanted to know why he was so late. His answer, "I had to take my folks to the Henry S. Schellenberg Bible study and stayed there until I could take them back home." I needed to hear no more. A yearning for Bible study took out of me the little fun I was having. I longed for a different setting and different company. There was no longer any purpose in my staying at the dance. I found my coat and began walking home. Little did I realize that the majority of the young people present had that same longing for Christian fellowship. But running away from that youth group did not change my life. I went through the same experience several times.

On another occasion I was with that same group of young people. That time a granary had been prepared for a dance. It was a Good Friday evening. I only remember one thing about the evening: before we even moved to the granary for the dance the mother of the home came into the room where we were gathered and told us the story of the crucifixion. When she finished, the rest of the young people moved to the dance. I could not. I ran home, about half a mile, and went to bed. There I pulled the blanket over my face and prayed for forgiveness.

But even that experience did not bring resolution. At the time my parents were attending services in both the Lowe Farm Berghaler Church and in the local Kronsweide Sommerfelder Church. A crisis for me came one Sunday evening. The rest of the family was at the Kronsweide *Jugendverein*. I was at a farewell dance for a certain John Dyck family which was preparing to leave for British Columbia. I must have looked totally forlorn. One of the Kronsweide fellows noticed my unhappiness and approached me with several bottles of beer. He shoved them into my hands and said, "Henry, have these and you will be happier." In one brief moment my life flashed before me. It was meaningless. That was my meeting with destiny. I could no longer coast. Without thanking him, I placed the bottles on the floor and left for home about two miles away. I knew my family was at the Kronsweide *Jugendverein*. I resolved then and there that I needed different company.

The "conversion" itself was rather anticlimactic. For months I had been longing for a different youth environment. One day a cousin from Lowe Farm, John Nickel, invited me to attend the Lowe Farm young peoples' meetings with Henry S. Schellenberg. He used the R. A. Torrey method for "saving" people. The approach was direct, with

several simple steps, and the results were immediate. I was an easy victim. I came into the room totally unprepared. Schellenberg's first step was to ask me, "Are you saved?" Upon my vague negative response he gave me a Bible and asked me to read John 3:16. I read the verse: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." He then asked me to place my name into that verse and read, "For God so loved Henry, that he gave his only begotten Son, that if Henry believes in him" He asked me whether I believed that. I told him I did. We then fell on our knees and he asked me to thank God for salvation. I did as I was told and he assured me that I now was God's child. When I told him I felt no change, he assured me feelings would come later. They did—and I became more confused and frustrated than before. Now I was not only depressed, I felt totally lost. That was my first encounter with Fundamentalism. Although my own theology was in no way systematized, it was neither Fundamentalism nor Liberalism. We Sommerfelder youth were the product of parental and church teaching that was basically Anabaptist. As I have said before, the wineskin of the Sommerfelder faith was brittle and needed reform and new life. It lacked vitality. Our faith in Christ needed a new touch. But its main emphasis was still that we needed to follow Jesus, and that teaching remained valid and true.

I would not want to say that Schellenberg was not serious, nor that my prayer was not genuine. But that experience had not been built on what I had been taught and what I believed. I had always believed in Jesus Christ. I had prayed my regular prayers and, when I felt conscience-stricken, I had prayed for forgiveness. I had yearned for different company, but I had not been prepared to enter the company of the saved in such a radical way. Schellenberg did not understand that I had faith and that what I needed was to have my faith work more effectively in life. It seems to me I would have been more fulfilled if he had helped me gain victory and meaning in life.

Through the preaching of the Bergthaler ministers and the special evening services I was nurtured toward another step in my faith journey. That spring I joined catechism classes at the Lowe Farm Bergthaler Church. I enjoyed them but still lacked personal assurance. I discussed that with my parents. One day Father advised me to take a horse and sleigh and visit our minister, William P. Heinrichs. When I shared my searching with Heinrichs he simply said, "It is good to feel lost." Somehow he did not help me.

Full assurance or understanding came one evening when I was in the hay loft while doing evening chores. I was on my knees in prayer and told the Lord my frustrations. I told him how every step on my faith journey had just created more frustration. I felt so lost. Then I told him to take me just as I was. Kindly the Lord removed my feeling of depression. Later I shared this with my parents and together we knelt in prayer. That prayer was very important for me. I then realized—it seems for the first time—that this second mother cared and was concerned for us, her stepchildren.

When was I “saved?” I don’t know. Even after my conversion experience, many faith questions still left me bewildered. Within the renewal movement of the time there was a strong emphasis on eternal security. On that first evening Henry Schellenberg had given me all the key verses related to eternal security teaching. The theology was, “Once saved, always saved.” That emphasis was so different from everything I had ever been taught and troubled me for a long time. I had to learn through personal Bible study that God would keep me through my faith.

Another gnawing issue that confused me, and several years later became a serious problem, was the matter of nonresistance. The revival movement was integrally related to the Canadian Sunday School Mission and to graduates of schools like Winnipeg Bible Institute and Los Angeles Bible Institute. Little did we realize in our small secluded Kronsweide area that this revival movement had far-flung tentacles into American Fundamentalist theology which supported a militant position. A few years later we were to discover what that meant.

I have always appreciated the renewal movements of the 1930s and the new direction they gave to my life. I never longed to go back to those three years of emptiness and purposeless drifting prior to my conversion. However, I have often thought how nice it would have been if those revival leaders would have had an appreciation for the Sommerfelder tradition, its theology and the faith we did have. If only, instead of making light of it, they might have built on it. For me that void was filled years later when I was brought into contact with leaders in the General Conference and (Old) Mennonite Church.

The Canadian Sunday School Mission and the related Child Evangelism Inc., both outgrowths of the American Bible Institute movement, placed major emphasis on instant conversion. I recall a Sunday School Mission evangelism effort in Lowe Farm during the early

1930s. The speaker, Lloyd Hunter, preached a sermon on hell. We could almost feel the heat and literally looked at the cracks in floor boards for signs of smoke. When the altar call was given almost all young people present wanted to be saved. The emotional stress was so intense that only the hardest individuals could resist. But for most those conversions lasted only a short while. They were not grounded and discipleship was not included. The impact of that emphasis can be sensed even today. Recently, at the funeral of an older Rosefarm resident, I visited with former friends. We talked about the departed person. My friends focused only on the man's conversion 50 years ago. Not a word was said about his pilgrimage or his growth in faith. I firmly believe that if those individuals were to go back to their alma mater, Winnipeg Bible Institute, later Winnipeg Bible College, now Providence College, they would discover a more mature scriptural emphasis there too.

Several years after my conversion I learned to know Dr. Harold S. Bender, then dean of Goshen College (later dean of Goshen Biblical Seminary). His lectures were so refreshing. They helped me sort out my position on non-resistance. His booklet, *The Anabaptist Vision*, was balm for my soul. It was something with which my father and grandfather might also have identified. At the same time I realize fully that the preaching in the Sommerfelder Church of the 1930s had not excited me. A visiting minister from the Menno Colony in Paraguay helped me put this into focus. I was touring with him in southern Manitoba when he suddenly asked, "Why did you leave the Sommerfelder Church?" I told him, "I might not have left today. When I was 18 years old I saw no other alternative." My answer agreed with Father's reason for joining the Rudnerweider movement: "Now it might not be necessary; at the time there seemed no other course."

The Sommerfelder Church has changed and continues to change. The church has opened up. Many ministers are writing their own sermons or are preaching from their own notes. They are comfortable with concepts like "conversion," "new birth" and "being saved." All of this is positive and good. But I also have some concerns. A Sommerfelder funeral I attended drew attention to a development which makes me somewhat uneasy. When the first minister spoke in German, he used concepts like "Er war ein guter Nachfolger Jesu Christi" (He was a good follower of Jesus Christ). He mentioned several examples of the person's faithfulness in life. That was good Anabaptist teaching. The next speaker simply said the deceased had

been “saved.” He quoted extensively from the writings of John R. Rice. It was a smattering of Fundamentalism without having been worked through. It appears the transition from German to English has brought in a new theology. It concerns me that my old church seems to be moving away from its Mennonite position to a non-Mennonite theology. Instead of looking to Mennonite schools, they have a tendency to look to non-Mennonite schools and journals.

My spiritual journey began in my Sommerfelder parental home as Mother taught us to pray and read the Bible and Father read us religious writings like *Pilgrim’s Progress*. In church and community we were surrounded by people who had faith in God yet did not challenge me to be part of it. I began to find meaning and fulfilment in the spiritual renewal fires of the 1930s and 1940s, then went on to find more satisfaction in my faith through contact with our schools and ministers and teachers in the General Conference and Mennonite Church. I find deep satisfaction in the renewal that is given expression in the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church of today.

I treasure highly that I could participate in the Church’s centennial celebrations this past summer (1993). I found the singing of hymns and gospel songs with organ accompaniment exciting and inspirational. The retiring senior bishop, John Friesen, and the newly installed bishop, Peter Hoepfner, preached challenging sermons. The two-hundred-voice mass choir, led by a young woman—granddaughter of my brother-in-law, bishop of the church—the choirs of the Sunday Schools, youth groups and ladies’ groups, and the choristers and ministers were inspiring. It seemed almost impossible to visualize the church of my childhood. I wished Father could have witnessed all the changes. In my greetings on behalf of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, I drew attention to the changes and compared them to what Jesus said regarding new wineskins for new wine. If the deceased saints know what is happening here on earth, my parents will be rejoicing with the church as well.

When my spiritual journey began during childhood I could not have planned the various milestones that have marked my way. It has been the Lord’s doing. My main regret is that too often I have marred the tapestry which the Holy Spirit was weaving. It seems I should have made much more progress. Too often I simply had to say, “Lord, forgive,” then get up and continue on my way.

6

In Search of Direction

The Gerbrandt family income had always been rather modest. Then came the Depression years, drought and the expansion of the family through Father's second marriage. For me that meant finding employment beyond the family and home farm. Working as a farmhand during the time I pursued further education was difficult but helped expand my horizons. Unknown to me at the time I was beginning to sort out my life's direction. I had my first major job at the age 18 on the James Davidson farm in the Kane district.

The Davidsons were respectable Scottish people, firmly established in the elite British mentality which considered itself superior to all other ethnic groups. They had one married and divorced daughter and three grandchildren living with them in their modest farm home. Mrs. Davidson was the kind of praying grandmother every grandchild would want to have: polite, loving and considerate. In good British tradition she always poured the tea or coffee, but I don't think she ever got things right. She always forgot that I took sugar in my tea and cream in my coffee. Of course, I never corrected her. My training at home had conditioned me that way. We were never permitted to say anything negative about what Mother served. Some days I had black coffee and some days cream in my tea. Mrs. Davidson felt good that she could please me.

James Davidson, a proud educated man, was a breeder of purebred shorthorn cattle and the administrative secretary of the Shorthorn Association of Canada. That position required him to be away from home a lot. I believe he spent more time in Toronto or Calgary than at home. His salary and expense account made farming profitable even

during the Depression. One of his unique quirks was his insistence that no implements should be left outside the storage shed for the night. Even during wheat cutting time the binders had to be brought to the yard and put into the machine shed. Davidson knew that his employees were not as reliable as they should be. To assist them in pleasing him he always telephoned the night before that he would be there next noon. One day it had rained heavily when he called and the binders were sitting in the field. Naturally they were brought into the shed immediately but in the process they left telling tracks. When the boss drove into the yard he observed the tracks and merely smiled. He had caught us.

The Davidson farm had a foreman who was supposed to keep things in shape. Actually it was the Davidsons' daughter, Mrs. Bruce, who really ran the farm. Her lover, John Gunn, the foreman, tried his best to keep all four or five farmworkers busy. We thought Gunn spent too much time discussing things with Mrs. Bruce. The farm was to be absolutely weed free. However, no chemicals were used and no summer fallow made. All the weeds were hand picked, put into a sack, then into compost. That was a mammoth task on a 640-acre farm. Crop rotation and the use of clover kept the fields fertile. To keep me occupied during lengthy rains they had me haul manure into the pasture or simply haul stones from one place to another. Mrs. Bruce was in charge of the kitchen maid who, incidentally, always ate in the kitchen.

I was a young Christian and took my faith very seriously, almost legalistically. One practice I had was to say grace before meals. That was not so simple when no one else prayed at meals except on Sundays. One Sunday when their United Church minister had come for the noon meal, I was introduced as the praying fellow and the one who could tolerate no stronger beverage than milk. Everyone at the table laughed, including the minister. After that, even his lengthy formal prayer did not seem very meaningful to me. I did not catch the humour.

My prayers were very sincere yet naive in understanding. They tested even my own faith. Once I lost a small glass tube which was used to get the milk from a frost-damaged udder of one of the cows. It was about six in the morning and everyone else was sleeping. The cow kicked and the tube fell into a deep pile of straw. I looked for a long time, then prayed. The Lord did not answer. I went to the house, woke Mrs. Bruce and asked her for another tube. She scolded me before she gave it to me. No sooner had I begun to insert the tube when the cow again kicked me, and once more the tube flew into the straw.

What a serious dilemma! I can still see that scared young boy on his knees in the barn. I told the Lord all my troubles. I promised I would do everything he wanted me to do. Finally, I told him I would become a missionary for him. (In the early 1930s, missionary service was considered the ultimate in Christian service in the eyes of Lowe Farm-Rosefarm-Kane youth.) It seemed as if I had the Lord cornered. Surely, he would have to accept my offer. Even then the Lord did not answer my prayer and once more I had to face the persnickety Mrs. Bruce to ask for another tube.

The months at the Davidson farm thrust me into close relationships with people who had different church and faith understandings as well as with those who confessed to be atheists. One worker taunted me with the ditty, "Now I lay myself to sleep with a keg of beer at my feet. . . ." Another fellow always broke into jubilant yodelling when I hummed a Gospel song tune. I had not known that my tunes were the same as his.

To this day I have not figured out the uncanny wisdom of two mules on the Davidson farm. One of my tasks was hauling grain from the threshing outfit. I was told the mules knew that they could push the wagon backwards to the small farm elevator if there were less than 50 bushels of grain on it. On one trip I decided to fool them. I loaded about 65 bushels on the wagon. When I wanted them to back the wagon to the elevator, they refused to move. I tried every trick of the trade. Finally, in desperation, I took out the extra barley with a bushel bucket. When I thought I had about 50 bushels left, I made one short circle to let the mules feel the weight of the load. Then, quite happily, they backed the wagon to the elevator.

At the Davidsons I learned to work hard. The day began at six a.m. and ended at ten at night. A week had seven days. On Sundays we did no field work. The Davidsons were proud of their religious reputation and looked with disdain on neighbours who did field work on Sundays. But washing and grooming their purebred heifers and steers was left for Sunday when they went to church. In fall I spent endless days on a model D John Deere tractor. I believe I turned over most of the soil on that one-section farm. The other farmhands were all let go after the harvest. Davidson was so pleased with my faithful work that he gave me a \$10 bonus for ploughing steadily from six to ten every day for several weeks. My regular salary was \$20 a month.

My experience at the Davidsons confirmed my Mennonite assumption from childhood: *Enjelända* were not Christians. The chasm be-

tween my faith and their faith was too wide to bridge in one short summer. At the same time I was deeply shaken in my own faith and prayer life. My previous reading of prayer books and missionary biographies had made God's leading so simple. Hadn't God always honoured George Mueller's prayers? When I left the Davidson yard that fall I felt defeated that no one had been converted and that I had seen no evidence of God's leading.

From 1936 to 1938 I spent two-and-a-half pleasant summers on the John F. Giesbrecht farm in the Rosefarm district. There I became part of the home. The Giesbrechts were a Christian family of elderly parents, two unmarried daughters and one son with whom I did most of the field work. All were older than I. The work was not hard and the family relationships beautiful. That home provided the love and security I needed and the Rosefarm community supplied the spiritual support and fellowship.

On that farm I also encountered some Mennonite religious legalism. They observed three holidays at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The third holiday was used to clean chicken and pig barns. One year their son Henry and I decided to do some spring field work on the third holiday. No sooner had we started seeding when a sudden, unexpected rain drenched us thoroughly. When we came back into the yard John Giesbrecht met us and proudly announced, "That serves you right. You cannot mock God."

Rosefarm was the district where the revival movement of the 1920s and 1930s had its roots. Within that movement it was generally accepted that every person had to experience a decisive, radical conversion. Since the Sommerfelder Church had never emphasized a dramatic conversion experience, those within the revival tradition felt the Sommerfelder were not converted. The Giesbrechts were faithful members of the Sommerfelder Church, but became objects of prayer in the Rosefarm community. Although John Giesbrecht had a profound faith in the God of creation who was Father of the Redeemer and faithfully followed through on his faith, he spoke of no conversion experience. For some those concerns remained even when he transferred to the Rudnerweider Church.

During the years I worked on the Giesbrecht farm I attended Elim Bible School in winter. The financial and social security in the Giesbrecht home made my Bible school experience possible and pleasant. It also made my early endeavours in ministry natural. The community had numerous Bible study groups and *Jugendverein* on Sunday. I

frequently spoke at various evening programs. Several of us young men gave a whole series of talks on Clarence Larkin's seven different dispensations.* Naturally we were all convinced pre-millennialists and almost knew when the Lord would return. I believe that was also the time when I preached my first sermon at a Sunday morning worship service in a Mennonite Brethren setting in the Melba district.

As I became involved in ministry, I also became more convinced that the Lord wanted me to be a missionary. Once more I put out a Gideon's fleece and was assured that that is what the Lord wanted. One evening P.A. Penner, a missionary from India, was slated to speak in Lowe Farm, nine miles away. It was during the haying and summer fallowing season. Driving to Lowe Farm with horse and buggy after the day's work was not possible. The Giesbrechts had a 1929 model Chevy sedan but it kept stalling every few minutes. I was the only one on the farmyard who knew something about motors. I was told that, if I could figure out what the problem was, we could drive to Lowe Farm after work.

During that afternoon, while cultivating summer fallow, I laid out my concern before the Lord. I knew it must be a carburetor problem. In my mind I took the carburetor apart in all detail, step by step, and tried to figure out why it drew air instead of fuel. Suddenly I saw the problem. There must be a slight chip at the top rim of the sedimentary cup. I knew the solution. When I came to the yard after work, I quickly unharnessed my horses and ran to the car. I took off the sedimentary cup and examined it. Sure enough, it had a slight chip where I suspected it to be. Quickly I cut a new thicker gasket from an old rubber tire, assembled everything, and the motor ran like a charm. For me that was the Lord speaking—he was calling me to be a missionary.

After the Davidson experience, work on the Giesbrecht farm seemed like a holiday. The two daughters with their father did the chores and we did field work. Horses cannot work 16 hours a day so I had a lot of free time and many Sundays were also free. I was treated like a family member. I realized how much I felt like family when the

* Dispensationalism teaches that the Bible divides time into distinct periods or dispensations. A critical element in dispensationalism concerns the relationship of the return of Christ and the millennium as written about in the book of Revelation. The revival movement in southern Manitoba brought with it from the United States a strong commitment to pre-millennialism, the position which emphasizes that Christ will return prior to the millennium. Frequently its proponents also feel confident that they can read the signs of the times and predict fairly accurately when Christ will return.

younger of the two daughters suddenly announced she was leaving home to work somewhere as a kitchen maid. Then came another announcement: she was getting married. She was much older than I and in no way had I thought of her as being anything more than a sister. When she brought home her fiancé, I felt he was not good enough for her. I simply failed to see how she could love him and commit her life to him. But she did. They had a good life and raised two fine sons.

In retrospect the whole Giesbrecht experience was positive. I enjoyed working with fine people, good horses, a considerate boss, lots of good food and even some leisure time. The financial arrangements were better than I had expected, probably even better than the Giesbrechts had desired. I worked for a modest monthly salary, plus I was given the crop from a few acres of wheat. It so happened that the crops were fairly good and the price of wheat rose unexpectedly. Everything was going well. Then suddenly, and sadly, my time at the Giesbrechts ended.

I knew that John Gerbrandt, my sister Mary's husband, was very sick. On May 31, 1938, I received a phone call to drive to my sister's farm immediately. When I arrived, John had already passed away. I was delegated by my family to take over that farm operation. Although I dreaded what lay ahead and hated to leave the people who had become family to me, I resigned myself to helping my sister. So I moved from the Giesbrechts' to my sister's farm.

It was a dilapidated rented farm. The implements were old and owned on a shared basis with two of John's brothers. All the field work for the three farms was done with one Minneapolis Moline tractor which had seen better days. John's farming operation was intertwined with his mother, his two brothers and, to some degree, with a brother-in-law. All were just emerging from the Depression and my sister's husband of five years had worked under considerable difficulties because of a leaking heart valve. There were no written contracts. Everything was based on trust and goodwill. Now I was to fit into that nebulous triangle. And somehow my sister was to pay me a small salary.

I finished that crop year and went back to school for the winter months. Mary went to live with an aunt. In spring we put in a new crop. I feared that the aimless, hopeless struggle for survival would continue forever. No one dared make a move. Those were very hard months for my sister and me. She was still in mourning and her nerves were in shreds. We argued a lot. The little she and her husband had owned was

tied up in the non-profitable farming operation. She did not know how to break free and start over.

A high school education now seemed an impossibility for me. Bluffton College began to fade beyond the horizon and my missionary career grew dimmer. May, June and July of 1939 were depressing and the rhetoric about a European war did not help. Then came August and the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. I still recall how I wrestled with the issues that confronted me. I wrote poetry to express my feelings but have lost the scribbler where it was written.

Then came a break-through. I was on the tractor doing field work. Suddenly I saw the solution clearly. That whole triangular farming operation was ridiculous and impossible and someone would have to say so. I was finished, absolutely finished. I struggled no longer and became completely calm. I drove the tractor into the yard and told my sister I was finished with that hopeless struggle which was leading nowhere. Instead of objecting, she cried out in jubilation. She too had come to the conclusion that there was no future in trying to save the farm in that triangular arrangement.

Immediately we drove to our parents. Father agreed with our decision. He too had seen that her farming operation was hopeless. He offered to build a house for Mary in Altona. After taking off the crop that fall I would once more be free. Her house was built and I moved on. I did not become richer through that experience nor had I received a particular vision or a response to putting out a Gideon's fleece. My victory came in recognizing the impossible, surrendering and going on from there.

From 1939 to 1941 I took grades 9 to 11 in Altona. In 1941-42 I completed grade 12 at Mennonite Collegiate Institute (MCI) in Gretna. During those years I worked on various farms in the area to earn money for room, board and books. Under very good arrangements I lived with sister Mary in the house which Father had built. During the latter part of June I usually helped plan Summer Bible Schools for the Manitoba Conference. In July I took the teachers to their schools. Then came harvest time and I would be out on some field swathing or hauling grain. The fall work usually meant starting classes late. I recall coming into a class in Altona and, as I sat down, a literature test was placed before me. I asked to be excused from writing the test. I had not read a poem or novel and had heard no class lectures. The teacher said there could be no exceptions. I wrote and received 18 percent. A fellow student saw my mark and announced rather loudly to the class that I

was a disgrace to the Altona high school. I told him to wait. By the time we wrote our June examinations, he had been expelled and I had written and passed all the exams.

One fall I found work in a district made up primarily of Anglo Saxons with some Mennonites mixed in. At that point news from the war was bad and sentiments against the Mennonites ran high. One story still bothers me. An English farmer claimed that a Mennonite had looked over his fine stock farm and coolly announced that, after Hitler's victory on the battle field, he would claim that farm. Another incident, much more pleasant, happened when I was having coffee in one of the Anglo Saxon homes. I am not sure why the other men had already left the table when the hostess came to me, sat down, and asked me about my faith and why, at my age, I was not in the army. I tried to explain what I believed and how I considered it wrong to kill people. She said that was good and then mused, "We have no options. My 18-year-old son is in Europe. I wish we would have known about conscientious objection."

In 1942 I graduated from the MCI and went back to work on the farm of George and Nettie Braun to earn money to pay off some debts. I felt cornered. I had registered as a conscientious objector (CO) and, now that I was out of school, I could receive a call from the Selective Service Board anytime. I could not go back to school and I could not go to the U.S. to attend Bluffton College. All my options were gone.

I recall how I sat in my upstairs room and prayed. James A. McConkey's booklet about God's guidance stared at me. Proverbs 3:5-6 pointed the way, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths." I looked at how God had been present in my life through the years and I could praise him. I looked at my desire and it was to serve him. The third ingredient was, "And the Lord will direct your path." I failed to see how the Lord would do that now. Then I heard that the special trustee in Winnipeg who was responsible for some rural schools was still hiring COs as teachers. I went to see him. Although he made things rather difficult, I was assigned to a school in the Deer Creek district southwest of Morden.

My encounter with that special trustee for rural schools was exhausting. To begin with, he did not hide his utter contempt for COs. He asked me what I would do if several Nazi soldiers came into my parental home and began to molest my mother. I told him that, if armed soldiers were to come, I would not know what to do since I was totally

unarmed. He suggested, like a good CO, I would turn the other cheek, twiddle my thumbs and just sit there. When he continued to push me I finally said, "I might grab for a chair and try to protect my mother." He jumped up and gleefully said, "You are one of us. That is all we would do." I said, "But there's a difference. We do not train to kill." Although I finally was assigned to the school, he made the year very trying for me.

Shortly after I had mapped out my school program for the year I received a hostile letter from that trustee asking me why I had not sold War Bonds or Victory Certificates. He claimed he had sent them to the school a year ago. I looked high and low for those certificates but could not find them. I reported back to him. His response was even more hostile. I was to begin selling those certificates immediately or he would have to take action. I asked my children whether they had heard of those certificates. They said their previous teacher had used them to write their spelling tests. Now I was in trouble. What should I do? I did not want to report on my predecessor, a fine Christian woman. I asked a veteran teacher and he advised me to "cool my file." He simply said, "That trustee is busy enough without your correspondence. Answering his letters keeps your file hot." It worked. I heard nothing more about the issue from the trustee.

At the end of my school year, COs lost their special teaching registrations. Once more my options seemed to be nil. It was then that the United Church of Canada opened doors. After a discussion with Mr. Blair, director of the Selective Service Board, and Dr. Cormie, director of United Church's Indian work in Manitoba and Northern Ontario, I received the following blunt instructions in the mail: "You are to report at the United Church Day School, Cross Lake, Manitoba, on October 5 for missionary services. Vouchers for S.S. Kenora passage and food are enclosed." That was no call to a General Conference mission field in India. Was that really God calling me through a very secular Selective Service Branch of the Canadian army?

According to James McConkey, God often speaks through circumstances totally beyond our control. Many years later students in my missions and church history classes at Elim Bible School often came for counselling. They wanted to know whether God was calling them to Africa or some other foreign setting. That would happen after a missionary had drawn their attention to a certain field or country. As I matured in my own understanding of God's call, I counselled them to commit themselves to the Lord and prepare for service. The Lord

would provide the place. Local congregations, needs of the hour, mission boards, finances, special talents, training and circumstances would all come together to find the location for service.

The years between 1937 and 1943 had been critical in setting direction. Seven years of studying and teaching, working on various farms to make school possible and rubbing shoulders with very diverse people—all had helped to mature me for more difficult tasks, victories and defeats. My dedication to follow my Lord remained firm. In reality those had been fruitful years of service as well as preparation. During that time I spoke at various *Jugendverein* services, organized numerous settings for Summer Bible School teaching, taught a Grade 9-10 Sunday School class in Altona for two years and led a very challenging youth group in the Deer Creek area. Five of the young people from that group made a commitment to follow Christ and were baptized in the Glen Cross Rudnerweider (EMMC) Church that spring.

Just recently a man came to sit beside me at a funeral in Bethel Mennonite Church. He leaned heavily on a cane and his receding hair line was greying. To me he was a stranger. After the funeral procession following the service, he turned to me and said, “You don’t recognize me, do you? In 1938 you knelt beside me in my mother’s home and helped me make my decision for Christ.” I had been a missionary in various settings and God had blessed me and prepared me for the next step . . . into the unknown.

7

Marriage and Ordination

By the summer of 1943 I was a confirmed bachelor, at least so it appeared. I was 27 years old and had never had a formal date. I had not even given marriage serious consideration. Since my spiritual renewal experience ten years earlier I had been so completely immersed in studies, various service projects and in earning my way through school that marriage somehow had not presented itself as a serious option. Furthermore, I really had learned to admire the Apostle Paul and his apparent freedom. Also, for several years, I feared I had tuberculosis.

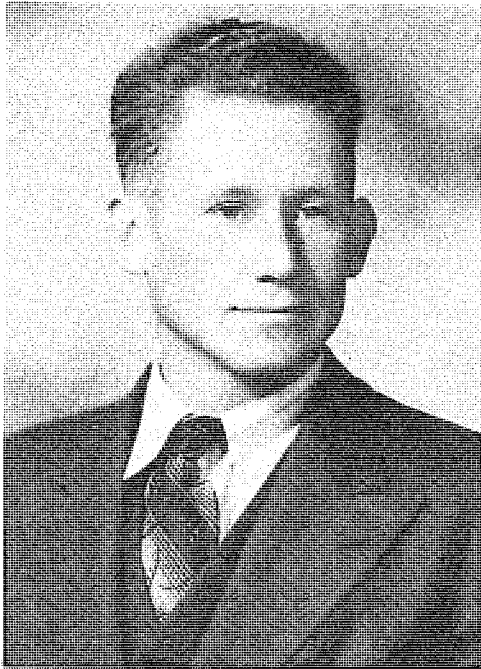
However, my public life in the Deer Creek school made me aware that, as a single person, I would be under varied and unforeseen pressures. Being free might not be the only desirable option. I still feel silly regarding one incident that drew this to my attention. One late fall day after school I walked down a trail along a beautiful valley toward the farm yard where I boarded. Although I did not see anyone, I heard the echo of a female voice calling for cows to come home. Mischievously I answered on behalf of the cows and walked on. Farther down the valley I met the caller. I suspected immediately that she had detoured in order to meet me. Although we never talked about it, I soon became aware that I had not acted wisely by echoing her call for the lost cows. Throughout my year at Deer Creek I learned that a young, unattached male teacher needs to be on guard. It is not only Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austin's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, who wants her daughters to become attached to an eligible bachelor!

On my way to Winnipeg one September evening in 1943 to take the lake steamer S. S. Kenora to Cross Lake, Father boldly broached the

issue of marriage. Very wisely he reminded me that I would be living in close proximity to Indian people and that, after a while, those girls would look at me differently. How right he was! Very kindly he suggested I should consider marriage, naturally to a white Mennonite girl. I don't recall my exact response except that I assured him I had no intentions of marrying an Indian girl or one from any other culture.

After a Catholic had finished building my log shack at Cross Lake, he asked me when my wife would arrive. I responded that no wife was coming. Immediately I was assured that it would be quite easy to get an Indian wife at Cross Lake and that I would come under considerable pressure to accept that. He was right. Indian girls, graduates from the Norway House Residential School who had learned to cook and bake, immediately began bringing me decorated cakes. It became apparent that they thought about as much of my cooking as I did myself. Although I had a few good recipes for baking cookies or roasting a stuffed whitefish, most of my meals did not turn out very well.

I remember well the time I had cooked a pot of brown beans. For some reason my stove was too full and I pushed the bean pot too far



In 1943 when I left home en route on my journey through life.

to the back of the stove. It tipped and dumped the beans behind the stove. I swept up the mess and fed it all to the hungry dogs that were in abundance around my house. Another time two girls brought a ready-cooked duck for my supper. It looked good until I looked underneath its wings. That sight turned my stomach so much that I took the duck off the table and fed it to the dogs after dark. I also had a few successes with some of my culinary experiments. I cooked a large pot of beans, then spread out the beans in a baking pan and divided

them into portions for separate meals. I did the same with bacon. I wrapped beans and bacon in wax paper and stored them in my porch which in winter served as a freezer. After coming home from school in the evening I heated those "TV meals" and supper would be ready in a few minutes.

I soon discovered that my carpenter was much more acquainted than I was with the ways of the Indian girls of that time. I quickly learned that seating arrangements on the long toboggans which took us down the banks of the Nelson River had an interesting pattern and that the pileups at the bottom were not as accidental as they appeared. A special banquet for official people at the Band House also drew it to my attention. Present were some missionaries, Catholic and United, a doctor, an RCMP officer, the Chief and his Band Council. My place was reserved next to the chief's daughter. I then knew that I had to be on guard.

It became obvious that this would be an issue not only in Deer Creek and Cross Lake, but throughout life. What probably unsettled me most was the realization that possibly I did not even have the disposition to be a bachelor for the rest of my life. It hit me forcefully that I had never taken time to think through my future. I had been too busy trying to serve and had missed preparing to live. My commitment to become a missionary or minister remained unalterable, but I began to realize that I was a very incomplete person. During years of preparing for service, of trying to outrun the army's recruitment people and the Selective Service Board, I had not paused to think about marriage. In fact, I had considered it wrong to establish any serious deliberate attachment to a woman. I decided then and there to end my bachelorhood status.

The Proposal

Susan Heinrichs was no stranger to our family. Father's second marriage was to her aunt, Susanna Giesbrecht. Thus, our families were closely associated. Often Susan and I had been to the same *Jugendverein*; frequently we had been together at youth Bible studies. One time when my sister Mary needed help in her home, she hired Susan. I had to go pick her up. I still recall the three-and-a-half-mile trip in our old Ford coupé. Neither of us said much of significance, yet our emotional vibrations were very evident. Although we didn't attend Elim Bible School at the same time, we occasionally met while I was at the Altona high school and she was in Bible school. Conversation



Susan Heinrichs in 1943 when she worked for Judge Adamson.

at that time was hard to start. Her constant female companion and their western-style Gospel singing did not attract me. They naturally heard those songs from a totally different perspective than I did. To me they were the old cowboy songs with Gospel words. But they had not grown up on Zane Grey.

For many years I had admired Susan Heinrichs. I suspect the feeling was reciprocal, yet neither of us ever said so. Because of those emotional vibrations I probably had avoided her, at times rather obviously. Now as I thought seriously about how my life might be made more complete, my

thoughts and emotions began to focus on Susan more seriously. I decided to write her.

Thus began my symphony of blunders. I more or less fell into my marital house by breaking down the door before it was built. Here I was 27 years old and socially a complete illiterate. I had never asked a girl to go along with me to any function. All my relationships to females had been of a platonic nature in larger groups like school, *Jugendverein*, service settings, youth groups and Bible studies. During the summers I, together with my friend Peter Epp, had organized Summer Bible Schools for the Manitoba Youth Organization and had canvassed for suitable people, mostly young women, to teach the classes. Often we had picked them up to transport them to their schools. But all of our conversations were concerned strictly with the kind of work they would be doing. It had been easy to write a prospective teacher and inform her that we wished her to teach Bible school in a specific school, then later go to her door and take her to her place of teaching.

But this was very different. I was far from home and had no one to go to for advice. No matter how much I considered all possible approaches, I didn't know how to start a letter. Finally I plunged right

into the subject in my first letter and asked Susan whether she would be willing to marry me and join me in my pursuit of mission work. I know I was being selfish. I can't quote from the letter directly because, accidentally or intentionally, someone destroyed all our correspondence and other private papers during the years we were in Mexico.

My letter was written before freeze-up, probably in early October. I was innocently unaware how freeze-up affected northern communities. For well over a month Cross Lake was virtually isolated as Lake Winnipeg froze over. There I was, waiting anxiously for a reply to my letter. None came. Taking for granted that Susan had received my letter before the lake froze, I sent her a telegram. In transmission my words were garbled up pretty badly and all she could make out was, "All is well . . . am waiting." Signed, Henry . . . Brandt. What did that mean? She had received my original letter and had also responded. But she did not know that I never received her reply. Thus the telegram confused her even more. Was that the same Henry who had asked her to marry him?

I had to wait until December 24 for her letter. That was a bad evening for me. The mailman arrived by horse and sleigh from Norway House just before we started our school Christmas program in the United Church. There were many bags of mail containing Eaton's Christmas orders, junk mail, magazines, stacks of the *Free Press* and first-class mailbags. Unfortunately, Mrs. Chalmers, the post mistress and the Hudson's Bay Co. manager's wife, was my organist for the Christmas program. Mr. Chalmers and his staff at the store wanted to be at the program too. That meant the store was simply locked up until after the program which was followed by the United Church minister's Christmas party. This included a big turkey dinner with the Chalmers, Harry Meadows, the local United Church minister, his wife Alice and me. Then we read Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" and played cards. To put it mildly, I was neither excited with Charles Dickens nor with the cards. Close to midnight the Chalmers went back to the store to sort the mail. Finally I got my long anticipated letter. Nervously, I jogged the third-of-a-mile into the spruce forest to my cabin.

The reply was in the affirmative. At the same time it conveyed a hint of hurt feelings. I believe if Susan were to be totally honest she might admit even today that she was more than hurt; she was angry. Although she had been thinking about me and might even have waited for a letter, my approach was too abrupt, too brazen. It seemed as if I had taken totally for granted that she was only waiting and would jump

at the opportunity to marry me. Between the lines I read that she had found it hard to reply in the affirmative to my unIntroduced proposal. Although she was probably more committed to mission goals than I was at the time, that was not the way she had envisioned the call.

When I look back now I realize into what an impossible corner I had pushed her. My letter was in no way the beginning of a courtship. It was the end of one that had not even started. She either had to say yes or no immediately and that caused her frustration. In stampeding to meet my needs, I had been totally insensitive to hers.

Marriage had not been in Susan's immediate plans. She had finished Bible school and, while I was at Cross Lake, she was working in the home of Judge Adamson, the judge who had the difficult task of establishing the credibility of COs who were seeking release from army services. For Susan too, that was a year of testing and challenge. She represented the Mennonite community in the Adamson household. She was the listening ear for Justice Adamson into the Mennonite community from which the COs came. She heard what Adamson said when he was off his official bench in the courtroom. When she received my letter she had begun to look beyond her year with the Adamsons and was looking forward to further education and career preparation. Not only was my letter frustrating in its content, its timing was devastating.

Susan and Her Family

Susan's parents, like mine, grew up in the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church. Her great-grandparents, the Heinrich Heinrichs, came to Canada from Russia during the last year of the 1870s' migration. Included in that family was eleven-year-old Peter, born September 1, 1864. Some years later he married Maria Giesbrecht in southern Manitoba. Those were Susan's paternal grandparents. Like my maternal grandfather and many other immigrants of the 1870s, her paternal grandfather had an alcohol problem that remained with him until death. Their son Peter, Susan's father, was born on December 4, 1890.

Her maternal grandparents were William Giesbrecht and Helena Dueck. Helena had a unique, somewhat legendary, ancestral background through her mother. She was the daughter of Heinrich and Maria Dueck of South Russia. This Heinrich Dueck, born in 1832 to Peter and Maria Dueck in Schoenberg, Chortitza Colony, had moved to the Michaelsburg, Fuerstenland Colony, and had become *Ober-*

schulze (mayor or manager of the colony). It is through Heinrich's mother that this story takes on a different colour. She was Jewish.

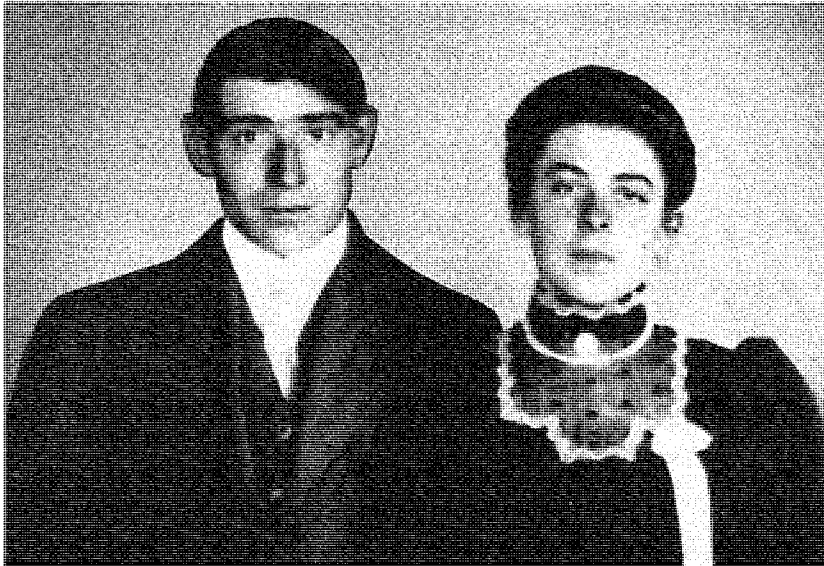
Maria Nowitzky had come into the Dueck family through strange circumstances. For a number of years Peter's parents, the Heinrich Duecks, had been visited by a travelling Jewish merchant named Joseph Nowitzky. When Nowitzky's wife died he began to take his young daughter Maria with him. He found the Heinrich Duecks trustworthy so, while he went on extended merchandising trips, he left Maria with them. The Duecks grew fond of this young orphaned child and her stays with them became longer and longer. Maria grew up and finally became part of the Dueck family and community. Maria made her commitment to the faith of the Duecks and was baptized and accepted into the Mennonite church. Naturally her Jewish father could not accept that step and he disowned her.

Peter, Heinrich's son, married this adopted sister. Peter and Maria Nowitzky Dueck's son Heinrich married Maria Epp. Heinrich and Maria Epp Dyck became the parents of Susan's grandmother, Helena Dyck. Helena came to Canada with her parents on October 5, 1875. It seems they had been landless in Russia since on the ship list, Heinrich was listed as a labourer. Helena, born October 28, 1865, married William Giesbrecht, born December 27, 1861. The William Giesbrechts became known as the rich Giesbrechts and were respected members of the community and members of the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church.

Into the Giesbrecht family were born seven daughters and two sons. In keeping with the tradition of the time, they all attended the private school in the Bergfeld School District and married in the community. It appears that all were strongly committed to the faith as expressed in the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church. Peter became active in the emerging Rudnerweider Mennonite Church and served in various committees. For many years he was responsible for and custodian of the church's mission tent. William always remained the quiet one who gave support behind the scenes. When the women were still young the oldest, Mrs. Tena Zacharias, died. Then three months later the next sister, Susan's mother, died. Would they all die in succession, from the oldest to the youngest, they wondered. From that large family have come a host of church workers, some of them missionaries under various non-Mennonite societies. The Giesbrechts' second daughter, Helena, born November 6, 1889, and Peter Heinrichs were married on October 29, 1911.

Peter P. Heinrichs, the oldest son of Peter and Maria Giesbrecht Heinrichs, was born into a family of four sons and seven daughters. In nature the family was high-strung and energetic. Three ministers, Peter, William and John, emerged from that family and served in the Bergthaler Mennonite Church. Two sons-in-law, Jacob Gerbrandt and Jacob Bergen, entered the ministry of the Rudnerweider Mennonite Church. That was during the renewal movement which had spawned the Rudnerweider Church. The religious fervour of that generation has affected second and third generation descendants and produced many workers in God's kingdom. For reasons that go far beyond this writing, a large number have found non-Mennonite church traditions more acceptable.

Helena, Susan's mother, made a commitment to Christ early in life before she got married. She taught her children to love and follow the Lord. Susan's father, Peter P. Heinrichs, experienced a radical encounter with Christ when Susan was about five, twelve years after his marriage. The conversion resulted in an abrupt change in lifestyle that bore fruit in victory over some rather negative addictions. His change in life was not immediately appreciated by all his old friends. A minister with whom he had shared many a social hour responded, "I regret losing the good times with you."



Susan's parents Peter and Helena Heinrichs shortly after their marriage in 1911.

Heinrichs quickly matured in his understanding of Scripture and aggressively worked at sharing his new faith with others. He began a Sunday School in his home in Bergfeld and enthusiastically told his story to neighbours and friends. Soon he became involved in leading informal Bible studies in various homes and spoke at various *Jugendverein* services. For the time being, however, he remained a member of the Sommerfelder Church, although he worked actively in Sunday School and *Jugendverein* programs not connected to the church. When his daughters became old enough to join the church, the question of church membership was raised in a new way. His contacts with Bishop Schulz* and his concern that his daughters experience a more active church life led Peter P. and Helena Heinrichs to join the Bergthaler Church in Plum Coulee in 1934. Quickly he became active there and in 1938 was ordained as minister of the Gospel in the Bergthaler Church in Lowe Farm. He served faithfully until his death in 1965. For some time he was a visitor in prisons for the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba.

As was expected of men at that time, Father Heinrichs was a farmer. Although his two marriages gave him some outside capital, farming never became a very profitable venture for him. He was not a strong man and, when the Depression hit the community, his own debts and some second-person mortgages were too much to carry. When the mortgage company took over assets of the *Waisenamt*, his land in the Bergfeld area south of Horndean was swept away as well. For three years the Heinrich parents lived on rented land northeast of Horndean but could not manage to buy it. In 1935 they bought 80 acres in the Rosefarm district south of Lowe Farm. After 15 years of difficulty with farming, poor health finally forced him and the family members who were still at home to sell the farm and buy a retirement home in Lowe Farm.

Susan's mother suffered for a long time with a thyroid problem. Although she faithfully cared for her family of ten girls, guided the household affairs and morally supported her husband in his own struggles and spiritual growth, she was far from well. Finally in January 1936, her doctors persuaded her to have her goitre removed surgically. The operation was not successful. She died through loss of blood. Her death was a testimony of victory as her life had been. She

* David Schulz was leader and bishop of the Bergthaler Church beginning in 1925. See Chapter 11 for more on Bishop Schulz.

confessed seeing her beloved Lord Jesus come for her and, as she died, she reached out to embrace him.

Five years later, in 1941, Father Heinrichs entered a second marriage. Anna Rempel was a fairly well-to-do, single woman from the Steinbach area. On December 31, 1957, after giving a testimony at the annual *Sylvester Abend* (special New Year's Eve service), she died suddenly of a heart attack. Again Father was alone. He married a third time in 1962 to a widow, Justina Bergen Schellenberg, who brought four children into the marriage. She died in 1989.

Into the first marriage were born ten girls or, as her father would some times dryly quip, four and a half-dozen girls. *Helen* married Jake Giesbrecht who was a building contractor in the Steinbach area until his retirement. There was a time when we considered them wealthy. It seemed they regularly bought a new Buick and holidayed in California. They now live in retirement in Steinbach. Helen is known for her exquisite flower garden. *Mary* married Abe Funk, a Mennonite



The Heinrichs family at the wedding of their father to Anna Rempel in 1941 (back row, from left): Abe and Mary Funk, holding Abe Jr., Helen and Jake Giesbrecht, holding Irene; (middle row): Margaret, Nettie, Susan, Tena; (front row): Agatha, Anne, Mom and Dad, Jessie; (in front): Elma and Elma Giesbrecht.

Brethren-turned-Bergthaler by force of tradition. Father Heinrichs and the church of the day thought it had to be that way. Mary could not join the MB church because of the immersion requirement. Abe was a farmer but later turned to welding. Early in life he developed a heart condition and passed away in 1973. *Tina* married Frank Groening, a rather prosperous farmer at the time. They farmed until their retirement to Winkler. *Margaret* married Eddie Groening, a farmer and church worker. Since their retirement to Winkler he has discovered the importance of his love for music. He plays the violin in several instrumental groups. Margaret is busy with choirs and visitations. *Nettie* married George Groening, a school teacher at the time. After 1953 he served as pastor in Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia. They now live in retirement in Chilliwack, B.C. *Agatha* married Erwin Groening, a farmer, later manufacturer, businessman and for many years a pastor. They too live in Winkler in retirement. Agatha has served with Eden Mental Health Centre for many years.

Anne married Norman Groening, a lifetime farmer. Norman served as minister of a rural church for a number of years. They are now retired to Winkler as well. *Justina* (or Jessie as she is known) married Frank Klassen, boldly stepping out of her church into the *Kleine Gemeinde* community which at the time was still rather legalistic. Frank has been in the plumbing business all his life. Jessie has worked in a senior citizens' home. *Elma*, the last of the first ten, married John Wiebe. The Wiebes began their life as teachers, then as pastors in Saskatchewan before going off to Colombia, South America, as missionaries. During the last number of years John has been manager and owner of the Fellowship Bookcentre in Winnipeg. Elma is an administrative secretary at Canadian Mennonite Bible College.

The second marriage resulted in three more children. *Irvin*, married to Elizabeth Loepky, has been in the lumber business in B.C. and Alberta. *Lillian*, a teacher, married a teacher Al Giesbrecht. *Rose* has married twice and worked in various occupations as a single person in Winnipeg.

Susan was the fourth daughter, born on September 13, 1919, on the family farm south of Horndean. She has been aggressive and service-oriented all of her life. She found school work stimulating and her elementary teacher advised the family that she should continue studies and become a teacher. However, financial pressures in the home forced her out of school. She joined the work force away from home when she was only 13. In those days girls were hired out by their fathers as

kitchen maids, yet often had to do much heavy work on the farmyards and fields.

Susan remembers especially one place where she had to do field work all day, then come back to the yard to discover she still had to fetch the cows, milk them and finish the housework while her employers went visiting or to church. By the time the day was finished, she was so tired that she barely managed to drag herself to bed. Early next morning the whole ordeal began once more. At the end of the work season her father picked up her small salary. She still thinks of the dreariness of those days. Over a period of four years she worked in seven or eight homes for varying lengths of time. I have sometimes said those employers should be charged with child abuse. Well, by this time they have all passed away as faithful church people. That was simply how things were in those days.

It was while Susan was on one of those work assignments that a messenger came to the yard with the sad news from her father that Mother had died following her goitre operation. About a year later Susan was called home to take on the responsibility for a family of six girls, all younger than she. That meant being mother to them, feeding, clothing and training them, plus supporting her minister father. For four years she managed the household. When she was freed from those obligations after her father's second marriage, she continued and finished her education at Elim Bible School.



Dad Heinrichs' six and a half-dozen daughters and son Irvin (inset) at Elma and John's 25th wedding anniversary in 1983 (back row, from left): Lillian, Rose, Susan, Nettie; (middle row): Tina, Helen, Jessie; (front): Agatha, Margaret, Mary, Anne, Elma.

During her growing-up years, before the girls left home to establish their own households, Father Heinrichs conducted a family string orchestra. He played the violin and any daughter who could hold a guitar accompanied him. Susan became an accomplished guitarist. *Jugendverein* organizations always considered themselves lucky whenever they could get the Heinrichs' orchestra to sing and play at their programs.

Through the influence of her Christian home, attendance at various weekly Bible studies and prayer meetings and lengthy Bible readings and discussions with her sister Mary, Susan gradually received assurance of salvation. A radical conversion experience at Canadian Sunday School Mission Camp had left her somewhat confused. Later, in the summer of 1936 when she was 16 years old, the leader of the Canadian Sunday School Mission, Lloyd Hunter, visited her home and enlisted her as one of his Daily Vacation Bible School teachers. She was assigned to teach at Newton Siding in a Mennonite Brethren district.

One day, while sweeping the room after class, the words of the song, sung so often during those days, "I'll go where you want me to go," caught her attention. They became her prayer and commitment. For her commitment to Christ meant service. And, influenced by the Fundamentalist revival movement of the time, service denoted some kind of mission involvement. And the word mission meant working overseas. She had already become involved with local Bible studies. That same fall a Rosefarm Sunday School group elected her as teacher. Later she taught Summer Bible School in various places under the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba.

In 1940 she began studies at Elim Bible School. There an inclination toward asceticism gripped her. She recalls how she would go into the Teichroeb* basement, where she was living during Bible school days, to kneel on the cold, hard, rough cement floor to feel with a great prayer warrior who had prayed so often and so long that his knees had become sore.

Susan graduated from Elim in 1943 as part of its first official graduating class and began looking forward to further schooling. Again outside forces altered her planning. It was wartime and Mennonite boys were called into the armed services or, on establishing their CO position, were called to some kind of alternative service. Bishop

* A. A. Teichroeb was a major figure in the development and growth of Elim Bible School. He began teaching there in 1939 and was principal from 1940 until 1963.

David Schulz worked closely with the CO boys and with the government organizations that related to them. The court judge most involved in processing Mennonite applications for CO status was Judge George Adamson, Chief Justice of Manitoba's Queen's Bench. He had asked Schulz for a Mennonite girl who could serve in his household and also represent the Mennonite presence in his home. Schulz asked Susan to do that task. Again her own plans, especially those for further schooling, were postponed.

Sorting Out a Mission

During the first part of my year at Cross Lake, Harry Meadows, the United Church minister, and several of his co-workers from Norway House made life miserable for me and other CO workers. Because of their patriotism and loyalty to Canada, they felt they needed to get rid of all COs working in United Church settings. However, they had not realized that the United Church staff in Winnipeg and Toronto and some key members in the United Church Board of Missions were sympathetic to the pacifist position. After considerable correspondence with head office, Meadows did an about-face and, on my behalf, even tried to persuade the United Church Board of Missions to appoint me as a pastor in one of their churches. That was accepted and I officially received an invitation to work with them. (Only recently, after I reviewed the old United Church archival files, I learned that this was approved at their headquarters in Toronto and that our appointed place of service was to have been the Poplar River Indian Reserve.)

I shared with Susan what I knew for the time being, but mail to and from southern Manitoba remained slow and sporadic, making communication difficult. We were planning a summer wedding and she began to look forward to joining me in mission work among our Native people in the north. However, after our initial decision to get married and move to northern Manitoba, strange events began to unfold with uncontrollable, cataclysmic speed. After a while it seemed as if I was in a rudderless boat in a raging sea. I sank into a deep depression, a condition which coloured my outlook for months — months in which I should have been happily looking forward to our marriage.

I informed Dr. Cormie, administrator of the United Church Board of Missions, that I was getting married and that my future wife and I were accepting his Board's invitation to work with them. I placed a huge order with the Hudson's Bay Co. for furnishing a house. Then

the bottom fell out of all my planning. Suddenly my future was no longer of my own making. It seemed as if I had forgotten that I was a Mennonite and a member of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church.

The Bergthaler Mennonite Church had entered into a partnership with the Foreign Mission Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church to begin mission work in Mexico. Randall Groening, a graduate of Winnipeg Bible Institute and a member of the Lowe Farm Bergthaler Church, had begun to work on his own with the Tarahumara Indians of the Sierra Madre in the state of Chihuahua. He had persuaded the Bergthaler Church leadership to accept him as their missionary and to take responsibility for the financial development of the mission station. During an extended exploratory trip through the region, representatives of the Bergthaler Church, together with several General Conference Mission Board members, had decided that this would be a Bergthaler Church project and that the General Conference would relate to it on a consultative basis.

Mennonite Pioneer Mission (MPM), the newly created mission outreach arm of the Bergthaler Church, immediately projected plans for another couple to join the recently married Randall Groening and Maria Martinez as quickly as possible. I suspect it was J. N. Hoepfner, the dedicated, enthusiastic secretary of the MPM, who dropped Susan's and my name into the hopper of potential candidates. It was then decided that we would join the Groenings as soon as possible. That meant getting married quickly, going to Toronto for some missionary medical training, getting ordained, saying goodbye to family and leaving for Mexico.

Mail service to Cross Lake remained extremely sporadic and slow throughout the winter with another six-week interruption during spring break-up. The letter from J. N. Hoepfner, informing me of my unanticipated and unasked for appointment, and my answer have been lost. I only recall that I was very frustrated and confused. I suspect a significant component in my frustration was the prospect of working with Randall Groening.

Randall and I had known each other ever since we had learned to walk. We were not exactly on the same wavelength. I was a cousin to the Henry Groening family through my mother and he was a cousin through his father. We had played together as children, been in the same young people's group and later had also attended Bible studies together. Our temperaments were exactly opposite. In no area were we compatible. Our worldviews, philosophies and theologies were miles

apart. He had graduated from Winnipeg Bible Institute, was committed to its faith mission mentality and supported Canada's war effort and enlisting in the armed forces. I had come via Elim Bible School and MCI, was interested in Mennonite programs and institutions and committed to the Mennonite peace position. It's not that I was more suited for the pioneer work in the mountains of Mexico. In fact, I believed he fit in much better and, through his Mexican wife, had many inroads into the Mexican legal and immigration requirements.

I was thoroughly convinced I did not fit into the setting which he had created and which our church representatives had so unwittingly and naively, yet wholeheartedly, accepted. I found no inner peace no matter how much I prayed. It seemed that my world was collapsing around me. My frustration at being caught with two assignments—one in response to a United Church invitation, the other arising from my commitment to the Bergthaler Mennonite Church—did not help me concentrate on giving much expression to my budding romantic relationship with Susan.

My school experiences at Cross Lake were generally good. Together with a carpenter I converted a log building, formerly only used for storage, into a classroom. Dr. Cormie sent me teaching materials for my class work. One problem I faced the first day of school was the denominational mix of the children. Because all old registers had been burned in a school fire that spring, I did not know which children to invite to the school. I picked two bright children, about grade four level, and walked with them through the reserve inviting children. Naively I also went to Catholic homes. Consequently, about a third of my pupils were Catholic.

Mr. Meadows, the United Church minister, was very upset. He even threatened violence against me. He accused me of having overturned a tradition that no Catholic children should come to the Protestant school. He said the Catholics would now have an excuse to go to Protestant homes. Naturally that denominational phobia was purely a white man's game. The Indians themselves did not care much about those distinctions. My Catholic children stayed and we got along well with them and their parents. I retained a good relationship with the Catholic residential school staff and they even supplied me with ice cream for the school picnic.

With chagrin I reflect on my faithfulness to the school philosophy of that era. I insisted that my children speak English. When I asked them which was Canada's principle language they boldly said it was

Cree. No matter how hard I worked on the language issue the children continued to speak Cree except when they spoke to me.

Two incidents illustrate how the Indians resisted the white influence and how they subtly tried to get even. The carpenter who helped me apply plasterboard on the school walls asked me to cut one sheet. While I measured it, he intentionally moved the measuring tape so that my sheet was about six inches too short. It had to be repaired but the seam showed. One day during an open house he stood at the place where that plasterboard had been repaired. Quietly, with a smile, he told the people that the teacher had cut that sheet. That same day my school children got even with me. We always had a hot school lunch which one of the Indian women cooked and served. The school girls washed and put away the dishes. That day, when their mothers were at school and took out the dishes for coffee and sweets, they discovered that only the top dishes had been washed. They and their daughters had a good laugh at the expense of the teacher.

When the end of June came and my class work was completed I left Cross Lake by ship for Winnipeg. On the S. S. Kenora I had an interesting encounter with Dr. Fred Stevens, a veteran United Church missionary. I had corresponded with him during the winter. He lived in retirement in Winnipeg. He was the language expert for the United Church and had done much basic work in compiling a Cree grammar. He had loaned me his material and had helped me learn the Cree language. He informed me that I was to be his follower in doing mission work among the Cree. He also shared a dream he had that the Mennonites were to take up work in the Little Grand Rapids region. My part in his vision did not come to pass, but later the MPM did work in Little Grand Rapids and neighbouring Pâuingassi.

In Winnipeg Susan met me at the bus depot. We took a long walk. That was our first face-to-face discussion after our engagement. I still recall that she was enthusiastic. Artfully she held back her own frustrations and deep hurts. Selfishly I had robbed her of her freedom and self esteem. And to make matters worse, I exuded no excitement and showed no emotional expressions of love. It seemed there was nothing to dispel the gloom that had settled over our vocational future.

For ten months I had been living by myself in the quiet, beautiful north with its pure air. And I had come to accept it as part of life. On July 1 Winnipeg was stifling hot; the atmosphere seemed thick with noise and exhaust pollution. The loud clanging of the street car wheels aggravated me. What made matters worse, I now was back in the city

where Dr. Cormie lived. He was the man who had swooped me up from the office of the Selective Service Board and arranged for my assignment in Cross Lake. Almost a year earlier he had helped me sort out the direction I was to go. At that time he had fit into the thought from Proverbs 3:5-6. And he had protected me when other United Church workers decided to get rid of all COs.

Now I was to inform him that I wanted to break my contract with him. How was I to tell him that my church had committed me to another work while I had promised to do their work? That mountain seemed too high for me to climb. I'm not sure how much I shared with Susan. She must have wondered into what she had gotten herself. Before we parted that evening we decided to meet at the conference sessions next morning.

In 1944 the Conference of Mennonites in Canada was holding its annual sessions in Winnipeg in the Mennonite Brethren Church at Juno and Alexander. The next day, as I approached the building, I was met by Susan, J. N. Hoepfner and P.A. Penner, the veteran missionary from India. I had met and admired Penner while I was at Elim. He bluntly told me that the Bergthaler Church had asked him to "screw my head on right." He told me Susan and I had no business working with the United Church of Canada but should be with the Mennonite Mission Board. Anyone who remembers "P.A.," as he was affectionately called, also will recall his authoritative style. Whatever he said made sense, at least for the moment. His comments seemed right to me then. I promised him and J. N. Hoepfner that I would sever my ties with the United Church. However, the next morning it didn't make any sense to me any more. Often I have wished that I had a positive way of expressing anger. I might have been happier later if I had been totally open and shared my frustrations with Hoepfner and Penner. But that would have gone against all my home and church training. Father was a stoic who taught us not to let our feelings go. No matter how much pain, you do not show it. You only speak in a controlled manner.

The minutes of the July 15, 1944, Bergthaler Church ministerial meeting record the decision requesting me to settle matters with the United Church Board of Missions. I found that extremely hard. Dr. Cormie was an understanding man, a senior church minister and administrator. He appreciated the Mennonite peace position and defended us at considerable expense to himself. In retrospect, it was good that I broke off my relationship at that time. The war was almost over.

A year later Dr. Cormie himself had to give way to more militant administrators and all COs had to leave their positions to make room for the United Church ministers who had been overseas fighting in the war.

My severance with the United Church created another problem. I was doing my selective service under its supervision. I now had to get my complete release from the Selective Service Board or I would need to be reassigned. Fortunately that proved to be a simple matter. Bishop Schulz was in good standing with Judge Adamson. Perhaps more significantly, by the time my request was processed I was married. When my turn came to appear before him he left the bench, took off his robes and came to where Susan and I sat. He was still interested in Susan's welfare and assured her he had heard of her wedding via CKY Radio while he was at his cottage at Winnipeg Beach. He wished us God's blessing with a warm handshake and assured us that my release from the Selective Service Board would be in the mail. We now could prepare for our assignment in Mexico with the Berghaler Church.

The Wedding

During the weeks that I struggled with our vocational future Susan worked on increasingly complicated wedding plans. When Susan's plans focused on a summer wedding, her sister Margaret came forward with similar aspirations. She and Eddie Groening also wanted to be married that summer. The two agreed that Margaret's wedding would be June 12 and Susan's some time in August. They dreamed of getting separate attention which a double wedding could not provide. Ironically, Susan lost out in getting a separate wedding. However, in the end she received more attention than Margaret did.

Before Susan's nuptial plans had completely gelled and become public, Tina, another sister, came forward and announced that she and her fiancé, Frank Groening (not a brother to Eddie) were also planning a summer wedding. That placed the girls and their father in a serious dilemma. How many free Sundays did he have and, more seriously, how many weddings could he finance? As they tried to unravel those mushrooming wedding projections a third component emerged. Nettie, another sister came forward with her concerns: she wanted to marry George Groening, a brother to Eddie. They were negotiating with the United Church about a teaching position at Norway House and therefore needed to get married in August as well. In desperation, Father

Heinrichs invited all to join him in a joint discussion. It is even rumoured that he sent word to his next two younger daughters to extract from them a solemn assurance that they were not planning to get married that summer. It was then decided: Margaret would continue with her plans for a June wedding, and the three sisters, Tina, Susan and Nettie, would marry on August 13 at a triple wedding.

I no longer can recall how much of that planning had already crystallized, nor how much I knew when I stepped off the S. S. Kenora in early July. Mail to Cross Lake had come in very slowly after break-up. I believe it only arrived two or three times, far too infrequently to discuss any detailed wedding plans. During the five weeks between my arrival in Winnipeg and the August wedding Susan and I had much to sort out. We had to learn to talk to each other as an engaged couple. I felt sorry for her then and, in retrospect, I recognize even those feelings were inadequate. The only male she had learned to know was her father who was a much different person than I was. He was highly emotional, expressive, prone to charismatic decisions and very free to express his love and care. I was slow and deliberate in decisions, stoical in my feelings and quiet when under pressure. It must have been frustrating for her to see how slowly I caught on in the making of plans.

As the wedding day approached I became more depressed. I must admit I was afraid. Although I did not understand then how to sort out my feelings, as I look back now I suspect they were related to my fear of losing my freedom which I had cherished so much. Feelings of depression can seldom be sorted out rationally. In prayer and waiting on the Lord, new assurance began to break through. I did not share my struggles with Susan. I was sure she would not understand my difficulties, my inwardness and slowness. She remained beautiful, lovable and pressed on and saved our future. Our flickering love grew into a deep relationship.

A deeply entrenched Mennonite tradition at the time required that newly engaged couples visit all the relatives and friends of their parents. That was not possible for us. We had too much planning to do, not only for our wedding, but also for our ordination two weeks later and our departure for Toronto two weeks after that.

Although Susan's father was not well off financially, a large, elaborate wedding was planned. It was very difficult to decide whom to place on the wedding list and whom to leave off. The three brides naturally had the same relatives but not the same friends. The three grooms had different relatives and also different friends. I remember

how we struggled to keep the list manageable, yet to include everyone who seemed important. As usual, we who were getting married thought our friends were more important than our parents' friends. I had been out of my district for eight years and was less concerned about district friends. Both Susan and I were more concerned about our school ties. It seems our parents won the struggle. When our list was finished it was, as had been feared, unmanageable. It included more people than any church or machine shed in the district could handle. Father Heinrichs decided to rent the Rudnerweider Mennonite Church mission tent. Tents can always be extended to hold more people.

Two special incidents from the wedding preparations stand out in my memory. Naturally those do not include the mammoth accomplishments which Susan and her sisters performed in preparing the traditional Mennonite wedding meal of potato salad, meats, home baked buns, cookies, sugar cubes, butter and cheese. Susan's father wanted cheese and lots of it. But that created a formidable problem because it was wartime. Commodities like cheese were in short supply and strictly rationed through coupons. Enough coupons for such a large wedding could not be found.

Susan's father had a number of Jewish merchant friends in Winnipeg. Somehow he got in contact with one of them and worked out a "deal" for the required amount of cheese. But someone would have to go to Winnipeg to pick it up. He would not send it by public transportation. Quickly it was decided that Susan and I would go to Winnipeg by bus. We could not have anticipated the nightmare that awaited us.

After completing our own business we looked for her father's merchant friend. It seems to me his business was somewhere on Logan Avenue. He sold us a huge head of cheese on credit. It must have weighed more than 50 pounds. It was old, highly cured and, to us naive cheese-eaters, it looked rotten. The merchant told us it was strong cheese, but it was the real stuff. He wrapped it up for us and off we went by street car to the bus depot. It seems to me the bus depot was just west of Eaton's. (In 1944 Eaton's was still the place where rural Mennonites gathered in Winnipeg.) On the street car our precious cheese with its penetrating, acrid aroma attracted people's attention and envy.

Accusing questions were directed at us. Where and how did we get so much cheese? How did we manage to get so many coupons? We then remembered we had not even been asked for coupons. Our answers had to be extremely evasive. The same embarrassment

awaited us at the bus depot. We were treated as if we were in possession of some valuable, classified or even stolen art treasure.

Then came the letdown. We arrived at Susan's parents and were informed in no uncertain terms that such powerfully strong cheese could never be served at a Mennonite wedding. It was too strong both in its penetrating aroma and mouldy taste. Our effort of dragging that cheese to the street car and to the bus and absorbing the questions and accusations by starving, suspicious cheese-lovers had all been in vain. Our precious cheese was taken to Rosner's store in Lowe Farm and traded for mild, bland-tasting Mennonite cheese, the kind that was made only yesterday. The secret of how he managed to get so much cheese without any coupons and how much he paid for it always remained with Father Heinrichs.

The second incident relates to the tent. The task of raising it was assigned to Father Heinrichs and his future sons-in-law. It was a major challenge and accomplishment since we were all novices. Gradually, step-by-step we figured out how to set it up. We felt so proud when we finally had it up. During the night a thunderstorm passed through the district and the weight of the water and the wind broke the main rope. In the morning that large tent was stretched out all over the pews, platform and pulpit. Not only that, the broken rope had pulled out the pulley attached to the central pole. Another big job lay ahead of us and that was our wedding day.

I believe there were only four of us to do the repairing: Susan's father, sons-in-law Abe Funk, Eddie Groening and I. Two major tasks had to be completed before the tent would be ready for the wedding guests. First, we had to find a large, heavy rope—but it was Sunday. All good people were in church. Abe knew that one of his MB neighbours had the right rope which was part of their pulley-and-tackle attached to the hip roof of their barn. We went to get it. Naturally those neighbours were in church. Nevertheless, we undid the rope from its pulleys. While doing this Abe's four-year-old son stood by and watched. It just didn't seem right to him. Finally he said, "Papa, dieses ist stehlen" (Father, this is stealing). We got the rope and went back to the yard to thread it through the pulleys.

Once that was accomplished we could begin the second task: setting up the tent. It was a hot, humid summer day and we worked hard. I always perspired profusely. I cannot recall what we did about showers before getting into our wedding clothes. The house was full of people and washroom facilities were not what they are today. Fortunately

those rural noses in 1944 were also not as sensitive as they are today. But the tent was in place by the time the guests arrived.

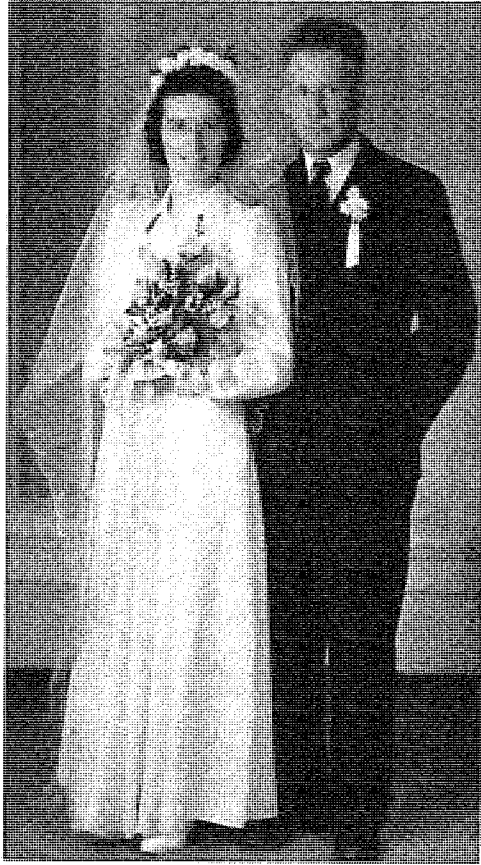
Early in the afternoon the wedding guests began streaming in. They came from near and far and, to our amazement, there were many people we did not know. Hundreds came and the tent bulged at its seams. Even to this day we meet people who unabashedly tell us that they attended our wedding. When we then hesitatingly ask them what connection they had to our parents, they unashamedly admit that a triple wedding in a large mission tent was so rare an event that they just couldn't resist coming to it. They had been there without an invitation.

Our invited minister was William P. Heinrichs, an uncle to the three brides. All of us, brides and grooms alike, had taken our catechism classes with him. Susan and I had decided we wanted Bishop Schulz to be our minister. But we had to compromise. It was a windy day and the brides fought an embarrassing battle with their veils and billowing skirts as they walked from the house to the tent. The three couples entered the tent according to age: first Tina and Frank, then Susan and I, finally Nettie and George. We also got married in that order.

Years later when George asked me when I had finally decided to get married, I answered jestingly, "I watched Frank and when he did not fall over, I decided I would go through with it as well." "That's interesting," George sheepishly replied, "I watched you and when you survived I decided to go through with it also." In all seriousness, all



The couples after the triple wedding on August 13, 1944, in a church tent on the Heinrichs' yard: Nettie and George Groening; Tina and Frank Groening; Susan and Henry Gerbrandt.



Our wedding photo taken at Eaton's studio in Winnipeg.

three couples have had good marriages. None of us remember the wedding text. It seems to me the minister preached an evangelistic sermon which he had preached before.

The wedding reminded me that I had been away from the district and church for ten years. During that time I had been in school for six years, had read and studied much by myself, and had contacts with people and thought beyond the secluded Lowe Farm Mennonite community. Basically Rev. William Heinrichs was still that same sincere, good man who had done so much for the young people years earlier. But he was against change.

I recall how he had driven to my parental home the evening before I left for Bible school and tried to talk my parents and me out of going to school. Uncle William, like many other people of his day, thought formal schooling was unnecessary. I have often wished he had re-

mained with his simple task of helping people make things right with God. He was a good evangelist. It was too bad that he was drawn into controversies regarding church leadership, constitutional issues and debates about traditions that he thought should or should not be changed. His later years of life were not happy.

Our evening program was a great social and religious event. Once more the tent overflowed with people. Because it was a *Jugendverein* night, no one needed to struggle regarding an invitation. Contributors included Elim Bible School teachers, J. N. Hoepfner and Abram Teichroeb, MCI principal G. H. Peters and Bishop David Schulz. The Teichroeb girls sang and there was time for *Freiwilliges* (a time for anyone to respond or make a voluntary presentation). I believe all enjoyed it thoroughly. It was a long and enriching experience.

Monday morning was the beginning of our "honeymoon." The tent had been taken down the night before to guard against another thunderstorm. I spent my first day of married life at a threshing machine pitching sheaves while Susan packed wedding gifts and helped clean up from the wedding. That first morning, while washing up for breakfast, I broke a mirror and someone immediately reminded me of an old superstition: breaking a mirror means seven years of bad luck.



After our ordination on August 27, 1944, ready to take on the world

Our Ordination

The pressing issue was getting ready for the ordination and our departure for Toronto in less than two weeks. I do not recall participating in any discussions regarding plans for our ordination. According to the Bergthaler Ministerial minutes, the program was set up on August 19, six days after our wedding. Neither I nor Susan were present. We discovered the flow of events at the ordination on August 27 in Altona.

The service was conducted in the Rhineland Agricultural Hall. The Altona church was just being renovated. J. W. Schmidt, chairman of Mennonite Pioneer Mission, led the service. David Schulz preached the sermon and performed the rites. What was different was the fact that, because we were ordained as missionaries, the ordination included Susan. I was authorized to baptize and serve at communions. Years later, when I was asked to baptize people in Altona, Schulz came forward with the claim that the original ordination had applied only to *Heiden* (heathen), not in organized Bergthaler churches. I had to have another ordination. For the second ordination as *Ältester* we invited as few people as possible. We felt it was not necessary.

Other speakers at the ordination were our fathers, Jacob P. Gerbrandt and Peter P. Heinrichs, and J. N. Hoepfner. My sister Mary read a poem, "Dein Platz" (Your Place) and MCI principal G. H. Peters read the poem, "Bereit für den Dienst" (Prepared for Service) written especially for the occasion. Finally Henry Born, a veteran Bergthaler minister, rose from his seat and suggested that the service be terminated. He said all things necessary had already been said. That was accepted and David H. Loewen, the long-standing mission advocate and aspiring missionary, made the closing comments. Naturally many congregational songs had been sung during that three-hour service. On Monday morning Susan and I began preparing for our next stop: Toronto.

8

Preparation Together

Toronto: Missionary Medical Institute

Two weeks after the ordination we left Winnipeg by train for Toronto for a year of study at the Missionary Medical Institute. It was a beautiful trip. Possibly much of the beauty lay in our first chance to breathe, to talk and just to be alone. We had been married a whole month and that was our first trip by ourselves. And what was probably as important, no one had scheduled us tightly, telling us what to do. A whole new life began to unfold for us. Never before had we seen the Laurentian mountain range, the endless spruce and pine forests of northern Ontario and the picturesque farmyards of southern Ontario. To us the berth in the night coach seemed luxuriously quaint and the dining coach, with all the good Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) cuisine, so exotic.

Our arrival in Toronto was the beginning of a rich year. We marvelled at the largeness of the train station, tall buildings, fast quiet transit system and the bulging church structures. We found a one-room suite on 24 Nanton Avenue in the fashionable Rosedale district. We had never seen such wealth. Our landlady, Mrs. Johnson, owned a house close to Bloor Street, a heavily travelled thoroughfare. Her proximity to downtown had helped her get her house designated as multi-residential.

Our room became very sacred to us. After putting down our suitcases we took the Bible and read Psalm 25:4-5, "Show me (us) your ways, O Lord, teach me (us) your paths; guide me (us) in your truth and teach me (us), for you are my (our) God, my (our) Saviour." We

then knelt down to commit ourselves and our first home to God. That Psalm has remained sacred to us and we have read it often when new experiences awaited us. We have also used it when our children faced new situations.

I believe the first test in our marriage relationship was thrust upon us when we accepted Mrs. Johnson's offer to work off some of our rent. She wanted us to rejuvenate several rooms with paint and wall-paper. I made the mistake of assuming that I could figure out things logically. But Susan had done that kind of work before. Our relationship till then had been rather formal. We had not done anything together. Papering a room is always a trying event for a husband and wife team. But in 1944 those paper panels had no glue on the back side. Glue was prepared with flour and water and it tended to be too thick or too thin. No sooner was one of our panels on the wall, then we would notice it was either not straight or the pattern did not match or it had a wrinkle. Or a panel might decide, for no apparent reason, to cascade down on our heads. I recall how we began blaming and scolding each other. By the end of that job we were hurt inwardly and outwardly. A longer courtship and a few minor jobs together might



Susan in her Missionary Medical Institute uniform in front of our Toronto house.

have conditioned us for that first wallpapering effort. We have matured in 50 years of married life. If we wallpaper today I don't figure things out but take a position well back from the wall and assume a managerial, servanthood position and get Susan anything she needs. It would have been a honeymoon in 1944 if I would have done so then.

In Toronto we were introduced to urban living. Pasteurized milk was rather new at the time. One of our professors at the school talked about how it had come to Toronto. The city Fathers had been asked to approve selling pasteurized milk to the public. But every time a sample of that new milk had been sent to city hall, they had rejected it because it just didn't taste like the milk they had on the farm. In desperation, experts from the Health Department tried one more experiment. They mixed into the batch a little human perspiration, a touch of barnyard ingredients and brought that "pasteurized" milk to the city Fathers. It met with their approval. It tasted just the way it had in the good old days at home on the farm.

During our stay in Toronto we visited many churches. We learned to know some of Toronto's great preachers like Dr. Oswald J. Smith and Charles Templeton. Smith was missions incarnate and conducted famous mission conferences. Templeton was the great orator who kept 5,000 young people spellbound in the great Massey Hall. We learned to know what Youth for Christ was and met its young founder. We participated in a mass, inter-church evangelistic crusade in Maple Leaf Gardens and I served as an usher on behalf of the Peoples Church. A strange experience for me was being cross-examined before I could preach in a Brethren in Christ church. All their questions focused on the orthodoxy of my fundamentalist, pre-millennialist theology. Being a conservative Mennonite believer from southern Manitoba appeared liberal to them. When they finally approved and assigned me a Sunday, I had my real surprise. All around me on the walls were the portraits of their church members in the armed services. When I asked whether they did not have any COs they directed me to their basement. There was a modest list of names of men who were in alternative service. They were discreetly hidden from their members and any unsuspecting visitors. Although I had had some encounters with militant civil religion through contacts with Winnipeg Bible Institute, in Toronto we were immersed in all its undiluted purity. The group invited us to a Sunday afternoon picnic. We participated but just did not fit into the sophistication, wealth and military presence.

Strange new attitudes and values confronted us at other points as

well. I worked part-time as an orderly on the 13th floor of the Toronto Western Hospital—at least I considered that Solarium to be floor 13. Neither the hospital staff nor the healthy-looking accident patients wanted to designate it as such. People wondered where I had grown up that I did not know that society just does not tolerate a 13th floor. They all believed that people would not get well on that floor. To them it was truly odd that we had been married on August 13, and that my wife Susan was born on September 13. They considered us very naive.

When I walked into Toronto Western Hospital for the first time I found it all very strange. My only previous contacts with hospitals had been a few visits to sick people. I was given no detailed instructions about serving patients. The Solarium where I began my work had about 30 beds. Its occupants were accident victims, primarily belonging to the various unions like railroad, forestry and manufacturing. Those men were not really sick but recovering from industrial accidents. It seemed as if the union kept them on compensation as long as possible, so my patients were a jovial bunch of men who wanted fun.

I gave them something to laugh about during my first morning on duty when I accidentally bathed a nurse. The huge open ward had many movable partitions which were placed as needed. My first assignment was to provide the water, soap and towels for morning sponge baths. With two wash basins half filled with water I walked down one of the aisles. I did not notice that my good-natured matron was coming down another aisle. We collided and I poured my two basins of water right over her. The ward roared with laughter. For a moment the matron seemed to sort out her emotions. I stood frozen to the spot, expecting to be fired immediately and told to leave the premises. Then she smiled and said, "I'll go and change and you clean up the water mess." Many times I heard about that incident from my patients and the other staff. In fact, it seemed to have been a catalyst which brought me closer to my work.

It was November 1944. We had been in Toronto for about two months when I found myself trudging slowly down the streetcar tracks toward downtown Toronto. During the night the Toronto-Buffalo area had received about three feet of new snow. Army vehicles had cleared the streetcar tracks. Huge army vehicles were carrying staple food to needy people. Slowly I made my way to the Toronto Western Hospital two miles away. My two-hour walk gave me a lot of time to reflect. So much had happened since I stepped off the S.S. Kenora on July the first. We had been married, ordained and had come to this huge city.

Our whole Toronto experience seemed to be characterized by walking and walking. Our residence, 24 Nanton Avenue, was about two miles from the Missionary Medical Institute classrooms in the YWCA building on 453 Valour Road. Because of financial limitations we walked to our classes every morning. Getting to our places of employment and our participation in Sunday activities required more walking. Naturally, sometimes we were forced to take public transportation because of time pressures.

Our classes were conducted in the YWCA building. Registration had not been difficult. Everyone took all courses. There appeared to be no options. Very quickly we learned to know A. Louise Kirby, the school founder and director, Alice M. Jeffry, the honourable school secretary, and Mrs. M. Warren, who seemed to be a friend to every one. Due to the fact that our lecturers, professors from the medical faculty of the University of Toronto, wanted us to understand medical terminology from day one, our first two weeks were spent learning to know and memorize a thousand new words, concepts and phrases that are used in medical discussions. That included knowing the names of all bones, muscles and organs of the human body. We had to know how the digestive, circulatory and lymphatic systems functioned. In two weeks we were to know instantly what a professor meant when he spoke of cardiac arrest, fractured femur or duodenum blockage. Within nine months we were instructed and wrote papers and examinations in the following courses: Ear, Nose and Throat Diseases; Heart; Surgery; Dental; Internal Medicine; Obstetrics; Gynaecology; Paediatrics; Tropical Diseases; Dietetics; Tropical Hygiene; and Public Health. At the same time Susan and I were also enrolled in a Spanish course.

The course that created most difficulty for us was our only religion course. It was taught by a minister who should have been in the army rather than in the pulpit. Although Susan and I were the only Mennonites, there were several other pacifists in his classes. He made his position very clear during one lecture period as he spoke of his own experience. One of his sons was in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He had trained as a crew member on the Flying Fortress bomber, a large four-motor plane popular at the time. His son was to navigate the plane and its bombs to their targets. Before his son left to go overseas our instructor had asked him to kneel down in their living room and, in the presence of the family, the father placed his hands on the son's head and prayed the following blessing, "Lord, let every bomb my son drops find its target and kill as many Germans as possible." And that stance

was the prevailing class spirit. The majority of our students came from the American Bible institutes and were used to that position. When they heard the news that President Roosevelt had died suddenly, a loud cheer swept through the school. The new president, Harry S. Truman, was expected to pursue the war with more conviction and might even follow through with war against Russia.

I experienced another conflict when I attended a prayer rally in the large Massey Hall. The guest speaker was a certain British general known as the defender of Malta. Travelling with him was Robert Glover, the veteran missionary, educator and church statesman. In Bible school I had used his book, *Progress of World-Wide Missions*, as a textbook. Now he was travelling with General Allenby to give that very necessary ecclesiastical touch to his testimony about how God had directed the bombs in the defence of Malta. On the large platform were Canada's wartime military brass: generals, officers of various ranks and members of Canada's War Cabinet. Here my missionary hero, now-turned military promoter, prayed to the God of War for victory. In the auditorium were 7,000 people, most of them in uniform. I found myself in very strange company. Prior to coming to Toronto I had considered myself conservative in theology. In Toronto I discovered that pacifists are not considered conservative, hardly even Christian. Rather, they are linked with the socialist camp, or possibly to the communists.

One of the Toronto experiences which remains indelibly imprinted on our minds to this day is VE (Victory) Day, the European end of World War II. Susan was in the hospital lab with her supervisor when they suddenly heard sirens wailing, car horns screaming and people shouting. They looked out into the street and saw thousands of people gathered below. Toronto seemed to be going wild. That evening Susan and I went downtown to watch the carnage. Cars were overturned or commandeered and overloaded until they could no longer drive. The large department stores like Eaton's and The Bay already had boarded up all the windows. Good people turned lawless and roamed the streets to destroy. Suddenly a drunk soldier saw me, a young man not in uniform, and asked for a cigarette. I could not help him. Then he shouted over the crowd, "Here is a Zombie." That was a derogatory term for young men from Quebec who dodged the army. I knew I could be mobbed very quickly. I took the soldier by his shoulders and gave him a hard, quick shove into the crowd. Before he could recover we had turned the corner.

The school required that all students work in hospitals or clinics. Sometimes we were remunerated, more often not. In Toronto Western Hospital I earned 30 cents an hour. In the clinic where I spent a considerable amount of time I received no payment. There was more work for the women students. Susan worked in three different hospitals. However, the courses required that all female students spend a certain amount of time in the Grace Hospital which was considered to be more advanced and more particular in its nursing technique. We both completed the requirements of the school and received our diplomas.

Briercrest: Wycliffe Summer School of Linguistics

Several weeks after leaving bustling Toronto we took a train to dry, windswept Saskatchewan. Briercrest Bible Institute in Caronport, Saskatchewan, was to be our home for the next few months. The Wycliffe Bible translators used the facilities for their Summer School of Linguistics. The work was very technical. We were trained to listen to the strange sounds found in different languages. We learned to identify about 500 different sounds. With that phonemic alphabet we were expected to be able to write down any word in any language.

If we had lived in luxury in Toronto, we lived in poverty in Briercrest. The school was so tight on its food budget that sometimes we literally went to bed hungry. One particular supper consisted of boiled ripe tomatoes poured over stale bread. Quite frequently, after a poor supper, those students who had extra money would converge on the one grocery store—incidentally, it was owned and operated by the chairman of Briercrest Institute Board—to buy cookies and chocolate bars. Although the food may have left something to be desired, we were highly challenged by the good teaching staff, which Wycliffe provided, and by our fellow students, candidates for the various faith missions.

In Briercrest I reached the zenith of my musical career. As a youth I had enjoyed singing and had sung many a solo on Father's Fordson tractor. Above the noise of its unmuffled exhaust and the grinding whine of its poorly meshed differential gears my voice sounded good to me. Some years earlier I had tried one of my favourite songs, "Lord, I'm coming home," at the *Jugendverein* in Lowe Farm, but without the support of the Fordson. I was so nervous that I had to give up after about half a verse. Here in Briercrest was my opportunity to become



Student body and faculty at the Wycliffe Summer School of Linguistics in 1945 at Briercrest Bible Institute in Caronport, Saskatchewan.

a singer. The school had a good voice teacher by the name of Mr. Davis. This Welshman had a voice which made the rafters shake. Susan and I enrolled. After some lessons we too thought it was time to "let our voices out," as he instructed us. Because we couldn't find the



Recreation at Briercrest

needed privacy to do so in the dormitory, we walked down the railroad to a bridge. Under that bridge seemed to be the ideal space for our voice gymnastics. There, unheard by anyone, we could try to make the beams shake. Alongside the railroad was a pasture with a number of quietly grazing horses. When the unsuspecting horses heard that trembling noise from underneath the bridge, they lifted their heads, then their tails, and took off in a frenzied gallop to the far end of the pasture. It must have seemed to them that the bad old troll had not drowned after all. I then came to my calculated decision: if my voice had affected innocent free horses so adversely, how might it affect a captive audience in a church setting. I decided then and there that I would leave beautiful singing to more capable people. Susan carried on longer. Her good alto voice was soon recognized and she was chosen for a radio quartet.

One of the beautiful experiences of the Summer Institute was to meet Cameron Townsend, founder of Wycliffe Missions. He was at home in Latin America. He enlightened us about the difficulties we would encounter trying to get into Mexico. He informed us that our Mennonite Pioneer Mission Board would not find any inroads into Mexican legal requirements. And, ominously he said, "There will be no exceptions. You will not get permission to enter the country."

Both in Briercrest and in Toronto Susan outshone me in her comprehension of the material. She also surpassed many of the professional students who had come via various college and university courses. She got an A when no one else did. I saw it then, and even more so now: If only she had been able to go to college or university, she would have accomplished many important tasks that now have been kept from her.

During our months of intensive studies in Toronto and Briercrest we spent a considerable amount of money. Although my income during my two years of teaching had been low, to some extent because of forced contributions to the Red Cross, I still had saved some money. Susan had some savings from her work at Judge Adamson's home. Together we began the year with about \$600. During the year we also earned some money through our hospital work. After we left for Toronto, the church had decided that it would support us. For our Toronto support and the trip we received \$410 and for our Briercrest stay and trip we received \$163. To pay for our expenses during the year we used most of the money we had saved. Assuming that our board would reimburse us later, we kept a very careful account of our

expenses, recording them in a small black record book. When we met with the MPM board after our return from Briercrest, we were asked whether we had paid all our bills. Very politely we assured them all bills had been paid. Upon hearing that, one of the influential board members said, "That's very good. Then we are all satisfied." With that statement the discussion on finances was closed off. After the meeting Susan and I took our expense record book and deposited it in a stove. From then on ours was to be a journey of faith. The good brother died several years later, never knowing that we had spent almost as much of our own money as of the church's. Now that almost all the board members have passed away, we can say what happened. They were good people and all meant very well. They too were pioneers.

After Briercrest we rushed home to prepare for our departure to Mexico. Packing bags and trunks and bidding farewell to our immediate and extended families and friends were moving experiences. Susan and I visited many churches where I preached and she shared. In 1944 women were not permitted to step behind the pulpit—what they said beside the pulpit was considered sharing, telling a story or giving a testimony. Now 50 years later more people remember her testimonies and stories than remember my preaching.

Our churches were happy to give us words of encouragement for the tasks before us. We were the first couple to be commissioned by the Bergthaler Church to go out in that way. Years before, A.J. Thiessen, a young man from Rosenfeld, had offered his services to the church for foreign mission work. At that time the church was not ready. Now the church felt it was. Our experience of brushing shoulders in Toronto and Briercrest with college-trained, seasoned overseas missionaries revealed to us that we were not ready to open up a totally unworked field. And our experience of touching base with other mission boards, both denominational and faith boards, told us that our Mennonite Pioneer Mission Board was not ready to direct us. We were all novices going into a battle of unknown difficulties.

9

The Missionary in Mexico

October and November 1945 were crucial months for us. We said goodbye to families, friends and churches. For me it was a nightmare. I felt I was stepping out into the dark. Some called it a leap of faith. It should have been, and it seemed my faith was there, but it lacked a reasonable anchor. Susan was more confident. And our family and church friends were all very supportive. But neither we nor our sending body had thought of a possible furlough, of further training, nor had we ever considered the possibility of failure. We had all dedicated ourselves without reservations to the Lord and the task before us. No negative thoughts were going to stop us. Raising questions about that undertaking would have been considered next to sacrilegious. With the counsel and blessing of the Foreign Mission Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church, the Bergthaler Mennonite Church was to have its own mission field.

To this day we meet people who somehow imply that we set our hand to the plough and then turned back. When I raised the caution which Cameron Townsend, president of Wycliffe Translators, had voiced, the board overruled my fears and indicated that they thought it would work out. All my misgivings about working together in harmony with Randall Groening, the knowledge that Mexico did not give entry visas to missionaries and our own unpreparedness I subdued with an iron will. We left for Mexico as if the man in Paul's vision was there beckoning us, "Come over to Mexico and help us." Unfortunately we were not the Apostle Paul and Mexico was not Macedonia.

In 1945 there was daily passenger train service between Winnipeg and St. Paul. We took the train in Dominion City. Our tickets called

for a berth in the night coach. When we asked for our berth they apologized and wondered whether we would take a roomette instead. And what a room it was! We travelled in luxury—and for the price of a berth.

On our trip south we stopped in Newton, Kansas, where the head offices of the General Conference Mennonite Church are located. That body was to support us on a consultative basis. P.A. Penner, the returned missionary, was then Executive Secretary of the Foreign Mission Board. We wanted to pay him a courtesy visit, update him and get his moral support. The Penners were very hospitable and entertained us royally. One of the interesting experiences was to see them dressed up in their India garb for serving tea. Penner also showed us his diaries. Immediately I thought of the history that some day could flow from those meticulously written volumes. Unfortunately, that never materialized the way I had visualized it. I also discovered during our visit that P. A. Penner and Daniel J. Unruh, a mission board member, were miles apart in their theology of mission. P. A. was the liberal-minded Anabaptist, D. J. the conservative-minded fundamentalist. Penner scoffed at Unruh's neatly divided categories of believers. He maintained that a person who believes in Jesus as Lord and Saviour does not have to be examined on whether he is liberal or conservative.

When we took the train in Newton for El Paso, Texas, we betrayed our Canadian ignorance regarding southern U.S. traditions. In the train we inadvertently walked into a coach that clearly had been designated **BLACK ONLY**. But before we sat down a conductor came to us rather abruptly and told us we could not sit in that coach. We had to go to a coach marked **WHITE ONLY**. Even the washrooms in the station were segregated. We had heard of race discrimination, but had never before encountered it in such blatant form.

At the Mexican border we were confronted with the reality of Townsend's warning. Mexico was completely closed to missionaries from outside the country. However, the border officials were kind and granted us a very high status. On our visas they proudly placed a distinctive "Catholic Clergy" stamp, but next to it they stamped "No Religious Work Permitted." That was the beginning of a three-year border nightmare. Through friends and lawyers we tried to change that tourist visa to some kind of working visa. Every six months we had to go back to the border to get a renewal. The U.S. was kind enough to give us a two-year resident visa. That helped us apply for the Mexican visa from the U.S. side of the border.

My worst experience came when Susan was in the Chihuahua hospital for Gerald's birth. I received a deportation order requiring me to be out of the country in 48 hours. Randall Groening thought he would be able to talk his way through at the border and get our visas renewed. He was unsuccessful and I got stuck on the bridge leading from El Paso to Juarez. The Americans would not let me in because the Mexicans had taken or not returned my passport and had refused to give me the proper entry visas. It seems I told the American officials a hundred times that Canadians did not need passports to enter the United States. He told me just as many times that I was a person without a passport in Mexico. The Mexican officials told me that what I wanted was totally impossible because it was illegal. They asked for a bribe. Finally, after about 10 hours, the Mexican official said, "Surrender and pay the bribe. We know that you Canadians will not try to bribe the Americans. You have to come our way and pay the money we want." He told Randall and me to come behind a certain garage after dark. He met us there in civilian clothes and asked for \$75 U.S. He said there would be no negotiation and no guarantee.

Finally we handed over the money and he gave us a small piece of paper from an unmarked notebook with no signature. On it he wrote in Spanish, "Let this man through." We then went to the bus, gave our piece of paper to an official and they let me across the border. We discovered that the official was a brother of the man who had demanded the \$75 from us. When I came to Chihuahua City I called on a certain lawyer by the name of Hernandez. He said we had been very foolish and had been in serious danger. For 25 pesos he got back my passport as well as a six-month extension of my visa. In similar ways we had our stay extended at six-month intervals until our three-year stay had to be terminated. It was always connected with bribes and half truths. Always we were told we could not do any religious work.

Our determination was tested as soon as we crossed into Mexico the first time. The train from Juarez to Chihuahua seemed so decrepit and dirty after our experience on the American section of the trip. It was very cold and dust from a sand storm came in all around us. There was no dining car. We bought a sandwich. It seemed to us that the sandwich spread was made with sand and red peppers. We had a mouth full of sand and it burned like fire. We felt uneasy when we saw so many men travelling with guns in their belts. It was about 1:00 A.M. when we arrived. We had been told to go to the Hilton Hotel. We experienced our first reverse hospitality service in the city when we

hired a taxi driver. He took us a long distance and, after paying and tipping him more than we thought was right, we got our room. Next morning we realized that the train station had been within easy walking distance of the hotel.

From Chihuahua we took a bus to Cuauhtemoc, the Mennonite mecca in the state of Chihuahua. We were met by very good people, the Jacob and Willie Janzens. They were our angels of mercy many times. The Willie Janzen home was always open to us until they moved to British Columbia. Then there were the David Redekops and their two sons Aaron and Peter and their young families. Also very kind and hospitable were Hans and Liese Renpenning. Those people all belonged to a small group of refugee immigrants who had come to Mexico during the 1920s' migration when they had been denied entry into Canada. The Janzens and the Renpennings were most helpful when Susan had to go to Chihuahua for the births of our first two children, Gerald and Elaine.

After a few days of rest and introductions to several good Mennonite families we travelled, together with Randall Groening, to Estacion Creel, our destination. The train must have been purchased from the United States before the turn of the century. It was pulled by an old wood-and-oil-powered locomotive. The cars were heated with ancient wood stoves. Wood for the locomotive and the heaters had to be gathered up in the forest as the train slowly crept up into the Sierra Madre Mountains. The 175 kilometres required about 12 hours travel time.

We arrived at Creel on December 21. There we met Mrs. Groening, the former Maria Martinez. She was a small, energetic woman whose English was somewhat difficult to understand. It was cold and the Groening house was not finished. Randall was in a poor mood. For some reason the supporting people in Manitoba had been slow in forwarding his promised support. I believe they were three months in arrears with support payment. He claimed he and Maria had absolutely no money. Our Christmas dinner consisted of macaroni and salt. No gravy and no extras. Eating that skimpy meal in an unheated house as our Christmas dinner provided the setting for the introduction to our senior co-workers and our new world.

We discovered that the Mennonite Pioneer Mission Board was probably more excited about feeling good that they had a missionary couple on the field than about being in contact with them and ensuring that their spirits remained positive. The relationship between Randall

and the home office was strained, at best, and continued to deteriorate until Randall severed his ties with the mission board within our first year there.

With the help of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church, through its mission arm, the Mennonite Pioneer Mission, Randall had purchased 21 acres of land. About nine acres were good for agriculture, the same amount was wooded and some was rocky. The valley in which the ranch was located was called Gachasuchi. Randall's plan was to build a Tarahumara community and raise the social and economic standard of the Native people to an acceptable level. He maintained that, after some 25 years of community work, the Indians might be ready to begin looking at our approach to the Gospel. Although his dream had much merit and should be respected, I maintained it could not be done. No mission group of that day would support 25 years of community work without a parallel effort to establish a Christian church. My understanding of mission work called for sharing of the Gospel from the beginning, then attempting to help the believers form communities. Both approaches were very difficult to realize. Randall's embellished idealism was based on the reality of Mexican laws regarding mission work, mine on blind faith and ignorance regarding Mexican reality.

The Tarahumara were a tribe of people high in the Sierra Madre Mountains of northern Mexico. They had been brutally Christianized during the time of the Spanish conquest in the 15th and 16th centuries. In some sense they had all become Catholics. Their understanding of the Christian faith was very much wrapped up in their tribal culture. They lived in constant fear of the spirits of people who had died. Most of their drinking festivities were associated with that fear of their departed dead. Every time someone died they had to have a certain number of *tesquenados* (somewhat comparable to powwows) to drive away the spirits. Usually those *tesquenados* ended up in drunkenness, fighting and deaths. Since we were the "medical workers" we got many scalded, burned and bruised people to treat the next day.

With our scant knowledge of their language, religion and tribal *morés*, we could not understand them enough to appreciate their spiritual needs. We worked on both the Spanish and the Tarahumara languages and mastered neither sufficiently in that short period of time to work properly. Although our conversation in Spanish helped us relate to Indians and Mexicans, we lacked the formal language study to equip us for the work we intended to do.

With our limited Spanish we tried to present Bible stories through



Standing at the entrance of our property with Susan, Maria Groening and our Tarahumara friends.

the use of large pictures. I recall vividly one such session with a man who had come to our house for some kind of medical help. I felt quite good about my progress when he suddenly turned to a Canadian wall calender with the picture of a woman on it and asked, "Is that another



Susan with Gerald and a Tarahumara woman and child in front of her house.

one of your gods?" The various biblical pictures that we had presented were to him pictures of our gods. Susan's language was much more complete. She usually gathered a group on our yard and presented Bible stories with the help of visual aids.

I worked very hard to build our own adobe house. For that area it was a nice roomy house and even had a central heating system. I was rather proud of my achievement. I took a 45-gallon oil drum and got a blacksmith to weld a door and a chimney hole into it. I then took ordinary stove pipes and led them through the rest of the rooms with heating drums in several rooms. The barrel-drum heater was built into the wall where four rooms met. It provided heat for each room. When Indians and Mexicans saw my creation they told me it could not work. They claimed smoke always only travelled in a vertical direction. I told them this smoke would also travel horizontally. I was so sure of my technique that I invited some Mexicans and Indians to see me light the first fire. I had been careful to select the very best pine. Before I lit the pine I created a draft in my pipes with a paper fire. The smoke followed my pipes and in a short time my stove and pipes were hot. Later we saw many such heating systems in other homes. The hundreds



Maria Groening with Olivia and Susan with Gerald in a potato field. The wheelbarrow, here loaded with potatoes, was also our baby carriage and car. We had helped the Tarahumara people plant potatoes and wondered why our crop was so much better than theirs until we discovered that they had removed the seed potatoes and eaten them as soon as they sprouted.

of oil drums that an American mining company had thrown into the bush suddenly had become valuable.

Randall Groening, who had also taken his training at the Missionary Medical Institute, had become a renowned doctor in the community. He was asked to Indian and Mexican homes and helped many people. He was especially successful in obstetrical medicine. His projected plan for the area included a medical clinic. He envisioned a Mennonite-type village where people would get their education and medical attention.

After he resigned from the work we continued the medical work rather reluctantly. We had some good experiences; others were disastrous; still other encounters with sickness were somewhat unorthodox. One time a man was dropped off by a truck in front of our door and left on the ground. He had many serious abrasions and a broken leg from being run over by a mining truck. Although we did not want him, there was no way we could turn him away and he had no one to get him. He was not conscious enough to tell us who he was.

We had received some experience in Toronto with putting broken limbs into casts. We cleaned him up and fashioned a cast around his broken leg. To counter the possibility of infection we pumped him full of penicillin. Although we gave him more penicillin than any prescription called for, he still developed blood poisoning. His temperature rose steadily. Finally we got a travelling doctor to come to our home. He and the mayor of Creel took the man, grabbed him by his legs and arms, and threw him into the rumble seat of their coupé. The man was in excruciating pain and we heard him scream until they were off the yard. They put him on a train and sent him to Chihuahua. We thought he would die before reaching the hospital. Many months later a gentleman with one leg, on crutches, dressed in a suit, white shirt and tie came to our door with a driver. He presented himself as the man whose life we had saved. The gangrenous part of his leg had been amputated. We never heard how he treated the ruffians who threw him off the truck onto our yard.

A second serious case involved a pregnant woman who had developed a hopeless toxic condition. I was called to her home during the night. When I saw her I knew she was beyond our help. She was already blind and in constant convulsions. From our Toronto studies we knew that she might only be helped in a well equipped hospital. I sent the truck back to our yard to get Susan. We tried very hard to save the woman. She gave birth to twins, both dead, and never regained



"Dr. Mennonita" Gerbrandt injecting penicillin. A doctor in Chihuahua City and another from San Juanita advised how to use penicillin and various sulfa drugs. However, it still was up to us to diagnose the ailments.

consciousness. All night we tried hard to reach medical help. The telephone offices were all closed for the night. The telegraph station was on strike. There was a rail strike but our local railroad workers had a small trolley which they used for their work. I promised to pay if they would go the 25 miles to get a doctor. They refused. We had to wait until eight in the morning to get a telephone call through to a doctor in La Junta.

The doctor came at ten and could still check the woman before she died. Meanwhile her husband had begun to drink heavily. Ominously he also put on his belt with a revolver. The doctor called the people together and told them that this woman had been his patient. He had made periodic trips through the mountains to see the woman. He had informed her that her condition was so serious that he wanted her to go to Chihuahua City to be helped in a suitably equipped hospital. She had refused and had told him she wanted to die at home with her people. The doctor then told all the people that we had done our best and should not be blamed. With that affirmative testimony we gathered up our infant son and hurried off the yard. There were too many drinking men with guns in their belts by this time. The atmosphere was

thick with hostility. Our consolation was that Mexican men did not shoot unarmed people in their backs. Besides, killing non-Mexican *gringos* (Americans) was a serious crime.

I should relate one more incident. It is typical of many other so-called normal cases. A Tarahumara man came into my office and tried to tell me something. He pointed to his stomach and said, "Yo tengo una creatura, muy malo aqui." Unfortunately I understood him to say, "I have a bad creature here," pointing to his stomach. Naturally I thought he was saying that he had a bad case of worms — not an unusual condition. Usually when we were confronted by something we didn't know or understand and which didn't appear to be too serious, we gave some kind of weak or harmless medicine and asked the people to come back next day. That gave us time to read up on our diagnosis and translate it into Spanish. I tried that on him. But he looked very puzzled. I knew I had missed the point. He got up and said, "Vengase" (Come). I followed him off our yard into the forest. There sat his wife and a small child with some kind of stomach ailment.

Some of our medical work was, at best, simplistic. Numerous babies with stomach problems were brought to us. A large bottle of boiled water or weak tea with a little sugar settled them down. People with festering feet blisters were taught to sit with their feet soaking in a weak salt solution. Some expressed their surprise that we knew so many things. We used a lot of penicillin and sulpha drugs. A Chihuahua doctor showed us how to pulverize aspirins and mix that powder with a sulpha drug. That was good for small children with a very dangerous diarrhoea. The local druggist was open for consultation and even permitted us to write prescriptions. A lot of late night studies in medical books sometimes produced wonders.

One of our more satisfying experiences was spending time with the Wycliffe Bible translators, Kenneth and Martha Hilton, at Samachique, about 80 kilometres deeper into the mountains. We moved there for our second winter. Kenneth Hilton had finished the translation of the Gospel of Mark. He wanted help proof reading it. He also wanted to begin a reading campaign with the Tarahumara people. The primer had just come off the press. That was the first attempt to teach the people to read their own language. We brought our two horses to Samachique so that Kenneth and I could make deep incursions into the mountain to reach isolated villages. With the help of that elementary reader the people then could make a transition to the reading of the Gospel of Mark. Susan and Martha Hilton stayed in their home and

maintained local native contacts and looked after the families.

It was on one of those trips that I experienced a near accident and the Lord's unique protection. To this day I can only ascribe that experience to God's care and the prayer of concerned people. We had been in our saddles for several hours. The riding had been very rigorous through extremely rough terrain. I had not noticed that the sole of my shoe had loosened slightly and had worked itself into the saddle stirrup. My horse was to jump down a steep rock, about three to four feet high, when I decided to dismount. When I swung off, the horse immediately noticed that something was wrong. It jumped and I fell on my back. However, in a fast reflex move, I grabbed forward on the rein and, even as I fell, I managed to grab still closer toward the horse's bit. I pulled hard and the horse could not run forward. It circled me. Then the sole came off and my foot was free. When I got up I saw Mr. Hilton's face was totally white. He thought he would see me killed before his eyes. All I had was a sore back, not even any fractures.

About a month later we had a letter from David G. Friesen, the MPM treasurer from Altona, describing a strange incident. He had been typesetting in the D. W. Friesen printing shop. While he was carrying a tray of type he suddenly had an undescrivable urge to pray for me. He set down the tray, withdrew to a room and prayed. He wrote down the exact day and time. It was precisely the time when I fell. If I did not believe in divine intervention and prayer, I would have a story for the column, "Stranger than Fiction."

Our oldest two children, Gerald and Elaine, were born during our stay in Mexico. After my encounter with border officials and paying a bribe of \$75 I came back to Chihuahua City in time for Gerald's birth. He was a robust fellow who announced his arrival with considerable screaming. At the same time he was "que buenito, que lindo, que blanco" (so beautiful, so clean, so white). When we registered him in the municipal office we learned we had to prove that he was our child. That left us speechless. I had to get two signatures verifying that I was the father. Fortunately that proved to be easier than we had anticipated. For a dollar each (more than one day's wages), two workers who had come regarding difficulties with railroad compensation gladly signed the affidavit that the screaming, wriggling youngster we had in our arms was biologically and legally my child. Those signatures are still on Gerald's registration papers. The same procedure had to be followed with Elaine. Both children, besides being a joy and blessing to us, were the delight of our Mexican and Indian friends. Quite fre-

quently we came into government or business offices and someone would grab our baby and run off with him or her to the various offices to show off the “ningo buenito, blanco, ninga buenita, blanca” (what a beautiful white child). Susan would usually be hot in pursuit to get back her baby. Our children opened many doors for us.

After Gerald was born, Susan asked me to go to a ladies’ apparel shop to purchase a bed jacket. Boldly I went in and tried to explain, then demonstrated, to one of the clerks what I wanted. I used all the Spanish I imagined fit the occasion. Finally a whole assortment of *senoritas* were trying to guess what I wanted. They laid out all kinds of ladies clothing for me and asked me to choose. I suspected they were intentionally not understanding what this *gringo* wanted. We were both struggling, I with words and signs, they trying to control their glee. In desperation I finally said, “un utro vez” (another time). As I turned to the door they began to roar with laughter. Ever after when I walked near that store I busied myself trying to read the signs on the other side of the street.

In our conversation at home, Susan and I tried to use our stammering Spanish as much as possible. But we must have used more English than Spanish. When Gerald began to say words they were in English. As soon as it appeared certain that we would be going back to Manitoba we began to speak Low German. We did not think that Gerald’s grandparents would appreciate an English-speaking grandchild. Naturally later that all changed.

After the Groenings left the mission we had no hold on the property. It was impossible for us as foreigners to own anything, even a horse. The mission board had bought the land but it was registered in the name of Raul Ochoa, a local Christian with the Free Methodist Church. However, we didn’t know that before Randall and Maria left. Even Randall could not hold property in his own name. When they moved away we were unable to get hold of anything. That problem, added to our inability to ever get a resident visa, led to the decision by the MPM Board together with the Newton office to terminate our stay in Mexico. The last official visitor to help the board at home make its decision was board member D. J. Unruh from Newton. I believe that, in the final analysis, their decision was based on the conviction that it was wrong to pay bribes for getting our visas.

Unknown to us, during the winter we were with the Hiltons, all property was transferred from Raul Ochoa’s name and registered with Maria Groening. Randall still retained his earlier dream of forming a

Tarahumara community. The MPM Board and he reached an agreement that he would pay for the property. I believe the price was fair to both parties. That permitted him to dispose of the property without reference back to the board.

Our years in Mexico were strenuous on our health. My weight dropped from 175 to 148 pounds. But more serious was our loss of confidence in our ability to work and function normally. For me it was a defeat. We had failed our churches and our newly created mission society. We had also failed Randall Groening. When we stepped off the bus in St. Jean my brother-in-law, Norman Groening, jokingly quipped, "Henry, you'll have to stand twice on one spot to cast a shadow." Somehow I did not see the joke. I was afraid to face the family and later our friends and church.

In the days and months after our return we often heard comments which implied that we had put our hand to the plough and had turned



With Susan, Gerald and Elaine, our family just prior to leaving Mexico.

back. We knew only too well that those who turned back were not fit for the Kingdom of God. What hurt most was that we could not speak of the difficulties we had encountered. We could not speak of that failure without hurting others. We reported on the externals, on the beautiful mountain ranges—there simply wasn't much positive to report. Neither then or before we went was the matter of the church's relationship to Randall Groening discussed. At no time did the church or the mission board officials attempt to do an in-depth study of our going to Mexico or our return. It seemed we and the Groenings had failed and we had to live with that assumption of failure. It would have been so much easier for all of us if our church officials could have shared responsibility for the failure.

For Susan and me those three years had been very draining. All our money had been spent and we were in debt. More importantly, we had less idealism than we had when we were married four years earlier. In that insecure state of mind we were to project our future. With no money and very low self esteem I was parachuted into the Bergthaler churches in southern Manitoba and Elim Bible School in Altona. I was to be an inspiring church worker and Bible school teacher. I still shudder when I think of having brilliant young minds like Jake Harms and Jake Sawatsky in class. I could not do justice to their searching questions. But returned missionaries are supposed to be experts. In a similar state of mind Susan was expected to integrate into the Altona church and society. Neither of us was in a position to do what was expected of us.

Why did the Mexico venture fail? Humanly speaking, it had to. For a fuller understanding one needs to look into the religious development of Mexico. The conquest and Christianization of the area which became Mexico followed the discovery of the New World in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. The inhabitants were forced to submit not only to the Queen of Spain but also to the Catholic Church. The Christianization was carried forward ruthlessly in keeping with the mentality of a church which in Europe was enforcing obedience through the Inquisition. Non-Catholics were not even permitted into that region. Although Catholic historians today admit to the harsh measures taken to subdue the proud Indians, they maintain that only 38 resisters were burned at the stake. They do not say how many were stretched on their torture racks until they accepted baptism, or refused baptism and were left on the rack until death released them.

In the 18th century a change of direction developed in Spain. By

the time independence came to Mexico in 1821, Freemasonry had begun to introduce secular thinking. After 1833 a trend developed which saw church properties nationalized. By 1911 laws against the freedom of the church were introduced into the constitution. A series of revolutions from 1910 to 1917 brought more restrictive laws against the church. By 1926 foreign workers were totally barred from Mexico. As late as 1934 laws were passed that forbade religious activities outside government-owned church properties. In all but practice, Mexico had a Marxist government. At the same time 95 percent of the population was Catholic and within Marxist laws, there was freedom to propagate the faith. However, all church workers had to be born in Mexico. That law was still in effect when we arrived. Today we understand what those officials meant when they told us, "What you want is impossible."

The Wycliffe Bible Translators received special concessions to be in the country as a Summer School of Linguistics working for the University of Mexico City to help transcribe Indian languages to writing. Mennonite Central Committee obtained a tentative concession at one time to bring people in to establish a hospital for the Mennonite immigrants of Cuauhtemoc. In 1945 there was no way to circumvent the law against foreign workers. We had tried the impossible. Cameron Townsend had been correct. Mexico was closed. It is not known to me whether Randall Groening fully understood the law at that time or whether our representatives who negotiated with him failed to comprehend his intentions. I understand him better now as I look back to the time when he told us we could do no religious work. In light of the commission from our sending body, that we were to bring Christ to the Tarahumara and establish a church, it seemed inconceivable to me that for at least 25 years we would only work on developing a Tarahumara community. I give Randall the benefit of the doubt that he might have shared that with our church representative and, in their enthusiasm, they did not comprehend.

Randall had experienced a radical conversion in his early twenties. Very enthusiastically he testified to his faith and took training at Winnipeg Bible Institute. What happened then is somewhat legendary. He was a great adventurer and decided to go to southern Mexico in pursuit of a girl he had met at the Bible institute. It was his understanding that she loved him too. When he got there he discovered that she was to marry someone else. Eventually Randall married Maria Martinez, a positive Christian native Mexican and a trained school

teacher, who helped Randall gain entrance into Mexico legally. In that mixture of adventurism, a fouled-up love affair and disappointments with a church which to him seemed slow in supporting him, he suffered shipwreck of faith and purpose. We met him in that state of confusion when we arrived at his home in 1945.

Before we came to Mexico Randall had experienced a very traumatic upheaval in his faith and personal life. He was cynical about faith and life and frequently expressed his frustrations rather vehemently. His highly embellished stories frustrated us and there were times when planning work became very difficult. At the same time he sacrificed himself totally for the Tarahumara and the poor of the mountain area. To this day I believe he should have remained with a non-Mennonite faith mission or a social agency in which he might have expressed his pro-military position. Neither at home before going to Mexico nor later when he came back on furlough could he agree with the Mennonite church. At the same time it seems our church officials never discussed those theological and ideological issues sufficiently with him.

We were not able to open the closed door. There was only one way to resolve the difficulty. Our board with the support of the General Conference made that decision. They agreed to turn the work over to the Groenings and have them pay back some of the investment. The Groenings then sold the property to a Protestant mission group in Mexico. Later the property was turned over to a Catholic group which now operates a residential school on the location.

10

The Teacher at Elim

We arrived in Altona in late September 1948. Arrangements had been made for us to move into a fully furnished vacant house. Former Edenburg residents, the Johann Buhrs, had been forced to go to a care home. Their children had not yet disposed of their parents' belongings. The house, just west of the Rhineland Municipal Office, was very small but comfortable. Both we and the MPM Board considered that a temporary arrangement. We still contemplated more schooling and a return to some kind of foreign mission activity. Our introduction to the Spanish language naturally kept our sights on Latin America.

Although I had lived in Altona for two years while attending high school and had known Altona as a boy when my grandparents lived there, and Susan had spent three years there when she was at Bible school, this experience was totally new for us. Only very gradually could we accumulate our barest household needs. We felt we were living among a people who had golden hearts, appeared affluent and secure, yet who could not comprehend our deeper needs. We needed confidence, self esteem, food on our table and friends of similar social status. An incident related to my work in the church illustrated the divergent social and economic status. I was asked to preach in one of the Bergthaler Mennonite churches almost every Sunday. Because we had no vehicle I asked local church members to take me there. After several Sundays someone suggested good-heartedly that I should buy a car. He meant well but at the time we simply had no money and no bank security to buy a car.

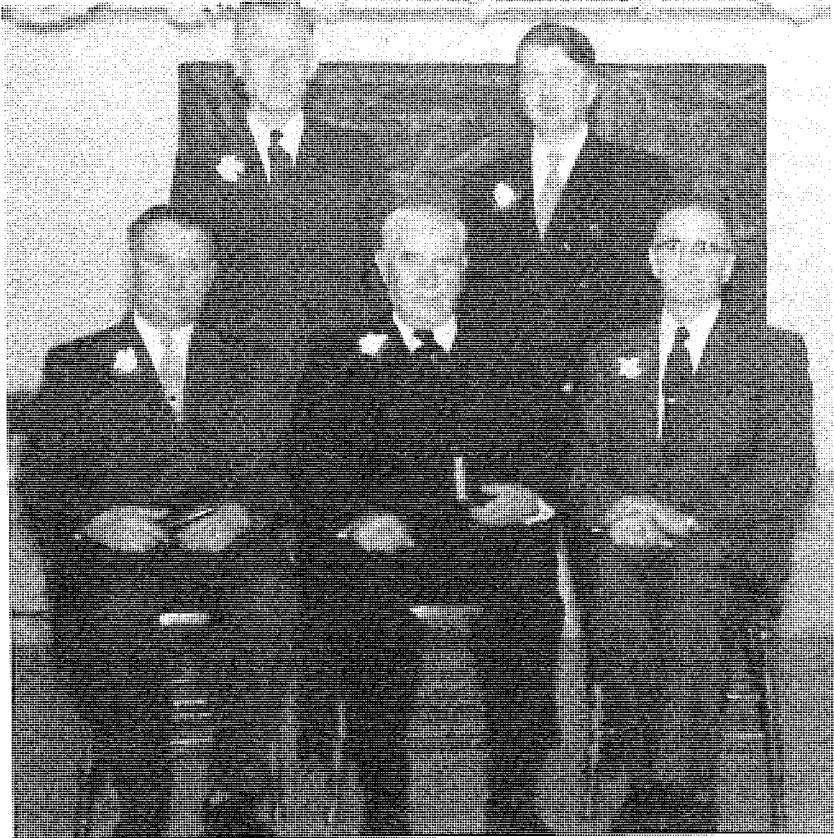
The Mennonite Pioneer Mission Board arranged for me to teach at Elim Bible School. Evenings and weekends were spent with the

Bergthaler churches in the larger community. My salary of \$100 per month would be paid by the Mission Board. An anonymous supporter gave us a further \$10 per month through D. W. Friesen. That arrangement looked good on paper. It was more difficult to carry through. It seemed my daytime hours were spent at the school, and my evenings and Sundays with the churches.

My experience in Bible school was very rewarding. Much of the challenge lay in my good colleagues, A. A. Teichroeb, P. A. Rempel, George Braun, Jake A. Wiebe and J. N. Hoepfner. They were supportive and understanding. I was the missionary with experience beyond our Mennonite church. Our Toronto and Wycliffe exposures were helpful. Many students were looking to do some kind of service themselves and they respected my contacts with people beyond their own closed communities. My greatest difficulties were with myself. Although I had as much or even more education than the other teachers, I was very conscious of my inadequate schooling. Very often my services and counselling extended far beyond my capabilities. And I was still suffering from the termination of our Mexico experience. To this day I marvel at the yearning and honest anticipation of the students in 1948 and their acceptance of what I had to offer. I remember four fourth-year students who challenged me in a very special way: Ernest Wiebe, Bernard Neufeld, Annie Funk and Corny Thiessen.

Throughout the winter Susan and I tried to ascertain the Lord's leading for our future. We considered our winter at the Bible school as a breathing space to regain health and confidence. We were united in our commitment to return to some Latin American country. With that as our goal, we anticipated further training. As the result of counsel we received, we decided to enrol at Grace Bible Institute in Omaha, Nebraska. We hoped at the same time to take Spanish at the University of Nebraska. The theological leanings of our fellow staff at Elim were in the Grace Bible Institute camp. They considered Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) as liberal. One staff member said you only needed to spend five minutes in its library to establish that. We were accepted by the two Nebraska schools and applied for a visa. Our church supplied us with a certified letter which guaranteed a certain amount of support. Then came the roadblock. The U.S. Immigration Department decided that there were too many veterans looking for work and schooling at that time. They advised us that their system had all it could carry without allowing foreign students to enter as well.

All doors appeared to be closed. Then one day I happened to meet



Five men who taught together at Elim Bible School in Altona for eight years (front row, from left): A.A. Teichroeb, P.A. Rempel, George A. Braun; (back row): Henry J. Gerbrandt, Jacob A. Wiebe.

Ernest Wiebe at a Winnipeg bus stop. He was taking classes at Canadian Mennonite Bible College and challenged me to go there too. With no other options apparent, we decided to take the step. That opened up a whole new world to me. We came to Winnipeg in the fall of 1949 with two small children and found a suitable suite on Edmonton Street. At CMBC I struggled with theological issues which I had never dared face before. I began to see creation on a deeper level. It seemed possible that a creation which might have spanned a long period of time was no less a divine act than one which happened in six 24-hour periods 6,000 years ago. Through a course in philosophy I began to realize issues in life are not always black and white. Contact with students from across Canada opened up many avenues of dia-

logue. I was introduced to the work of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and its energetic chairman, J. J. Thiessen. Throughout that year Susan and I tried to find direction for ourselves. Mission work remained our goal—and mission work still meant service in some foreign country.

As I look back to that year, it seems to me that Susan's foreign mission goals remained most untarnished. At the same time, I was the one who was getting a smattering of new insights and training. She worked hard to keep our household together and to help pay the rent. She worked as hostess and cleaning lady in the building on 16 Edmonton Street. The women's liberation movement had not yet emancipated me, nor our church society, nor Susan. She suffered, yet bottled up her frustrations for years to come. With determined dedication she submerged her own aspirations of doing things in her own right. She was willing to be a missionary by proxy. In my own struggle to serve and prepare for further service I naively let the situation go on, even though some of our tensions should have alerted me to her needs. I was desperately or blindly trying to prepare myself for mission service.

April 11, 1950, though overshadowed with sorrow, became an important milestone in our lives. J. N. Hoepfner, minister in the Bergthaler Mennonite Church, teacher at the Elim Bible School and secretary of the Mennonite Pioneer Mission, had died a few days earlier following a heart attack. On the Saturday following his funeral three distinguished leaders, David Schulz, bishop of the Bergthaler Church, J. W. Schmidt, chairman of the Mennonite Pioneer Mission Board, and John B. Braun, member of the Elim Bible School Board, called on us at our Winnipeg home and presented an invitation to a wide-ranging, multi-pronged assignment. They asked us to return to Altona. There I was to assume a teaching position at Elim, take on the secretarial work of the MPM Board, and accept a minister's position in the Altona church. No written notes were taken of our discussion. I recall that Susan and I protested somewhat in light of our dedication to foreign mission work. They strongly presented the case that this would be our mission, preparing young people for life and service.

Neither Susan nor I can recall any discussion of financial support beyond the five months' salary at Elim Bible School of \$200 per month. In 1950 it was not acceptable to talk about salary from the church. All the ministers were farmers or school teachers and did their church work without expecting financial remuneration. Our dedication to do the Lord's work prevented us from even thinking about finances,

much less of raising the subject in that discussion. In blind faith we tentatively accepted the three-fold call. We pacified our own feelings by suggesting we would live in Altona until a door opened which would allow us to go abroad. That door did open about a year later when a letter arrived from the U.S. Immigration Department, saying our working visa finally could be granted. But by then we had begun to get settled in Altona. Declining that invitation became a watershed decision for Susan and me and affected our children and the directions of their lives for all time.

The actual return to Altona came in an unexpected and strange way. It was 1950, the year of Winnipeg's record flood. When water began to rise on Edmonton Street, the city's Flood Control Board evacuated all women and children. I was driving taxi, helping with the evacuation, even though I did not have the appropriate license. Susan quickly packed a few belongings and, with Gerald and Elaine in tow, left for the south toward Winkler in a different taxi. At the Roland corner her brother-in-law, Eddie Groening, picked her up. Our other belongings were on the main floor of the house in which we lived. I stayed a week longer to help with building sandbag dikes. When the flood forced CMBC to move to Altona I also went. Together with some of our remaining meagre belongings I rode to Altona on a small half-ton truck. The rest of our possessions remained in the water-filled basement. In Altona we found temporary shelter in a large rooming house owned by Peter and Mary Hoepfner. I continued College classes until the end of April.

Then we had to find a place to live. From my brother-in-law, Bernard J. Klippenstein, husband of my sister Mary, we purchased a building lot south of his yard for \$100 on credit. We borrowed \$1,400 from a school teacher, Catherine Peters, to purchase a small house for \$1,300. The remaining \$100 were used to pay for material to build a surface foundation with a small earthen cellar. Incidentally, it was the same house which I had helped my father build 12 years earlier for my sister Mary after her first husband died. Since then she had remarried and the house had been sold. Now it was back in the family.

We were ready for business. We had enough debt to anchor us securely in Altona for years to come. Wisely, we did not figure out or prepare a budget for debt retirement. It just didn't make sense on \$200 a month for five months of the year. (We finished paying off our debts 21 years later when we left Altona.) Very quickly I was so deeply embroiled in work that I didn't notice Susan struggling under the

burden of procuring the barest necessities for our table. She maintains that I and others will never know how much she cried when she gathered wood and split it, or when she could not see how she would buy milk for the children. At the same time she was suffering from severe phlebitis and feeling socially imprisoned.

Our small house, 20 feet by 20 feet, with a small upstairs and a root cellar instead of a basement, was our castle for seven eventful years. Some people expressed their amazement regarding how little space we had. When P.A. Rempel, one of our Bible School teachers, first visited us he remarked, "Some people are satisfied with less than others." After realizing she was not in the foyer but in the house, Nettie Braun, wife of another Elim teacher, said, "Is this all you have?" Those comments seemed more expressive and humiliating when said in Low German. One advantage of having a small house was that we didn't need much furniture. The little we did have was either discarded by other people, bought in secondhand stores or fabricated by Susan out of orange or apple crates.

Although the house was small, it always had enough room. It was large enough to give me an office beside our bed for counselling students and young people who wanted to get married. It was large enough for various missionaries when they came to Altona. During our stay in that house two further children were born: Norma on October 24, 1951, and Linda on February 20, 1957. That little house developed a tradition which went far beyond our own circles.

One day after we had retired for the night there was a knock on the door. When we opened it we met total strangers: a young couple with two children. That non-Mennonite couple had come to Canada from the United States to itinerate and raise support to go into service for the New Tribes Mission. They had come to Altona and discovered there was no motel. The police directed them to our home with the comment, "They have room for missionaries." By that time we had three children, yet Susan found a place for them. The problem was there wasn't much space left for us. By the following noon they were well fed and ready to leave. However, they had not converted us to the philosophy of the New Tribes Mission.

I taught at Elim Bible School from the fall of 1950 until about 1965. During the final five or six years I gradually phased out of the Bible school program. My time and energies were being taken up more and more with full-time work at the Altona Bergthaler Mennonite Church. Several courses in our Bible school curriculum especially challenged

me. They included Sunday School work, Church and Mission History and the biblical books of Romans, Hebrews and Daniel.

Initially I found teaching the book of Daniel frustrating. My predecessors had left a fairly large library of reference books. Their orientation was strongly dispensational. Within that approach, which was fairly popular at the time, it was good to try to pinpoint rather precisely how soon Christ would return. I recall how I spent many a late night using a variety of reference books and charts, trying to make out the days and weeks of Daniel so that they could be understood by the students. Finally I discovered a new meaning to Daniel. In it I found a growing awareness of the greatness of God. I stopped trying to figure out exactly when the Lord would return and how the European countries would fit into the final days. Rather, I spent my energies discovering the greatness of God in the author's experience. I found Daniel's sharing of his knowledge of God and the growing understanding by those oriental monarchs very fascinating.

P.A. Rempel, our Russia-trained educator, had focused his attention on Sunday School teacher training. He was many years my senior and gradually tried to phase me into that work. By that time we were relating to the American Association of Bible Schools and leaning heavily on the Benson Sunday School materials. Elim was still strictly German and that material was all in English. I spent many, many hours in the evenings and at night to translate it into German. Even then there was more English than some of our congregations wanted for their young people. Nevertheless, I found training Sunday School teachers very rewarding. Soon teachers were using that approach throughout the churches. Admittedly, there were also a few quick negative reactions. In one Sunday School one of our students became overly enthusiastic. When he was chastised at a membership meeting he defended himself and said, "That is how Mr. Gerbrandt taught us." He was informed rather abruptly, "Mr. Gerbrandt is not leading our church."

As a result of that same course I also had an encounter with Child Evangelism Incorporated. I had warned my students against emphasizing child conversion too much. That was taken out of context. The same church leaders who, if they had understood that movement, might have been more concerned than I, criticized me for being against children becoming believers.

Where there were questions about my work at Elim, however, I suspect the concern was not as much about what I taught, but that

students related to me so much in English. Language became even more critical when I was invited to various churches to have the English sermon at our students' weddings. I soon learned that it was imprudent to officiate at weddings in churches where their minister had anticipated having that wedding. It was also unwise to preach in English when their local minister did not approve.

The language transition, both for the Bible school and the churches, was painful. I recall so well an experience in one of our churches. I had been invited to preach there by one of our students, the minister's daughter. The minister could not ask me to preach in English, but he was aware that his daughter had asked me to do so. I protested. She answered, "Most people would like you to speak in English but the church officials will not consent." Somewhat deceitfully she advised, "Begin the sermon in German, subtly change into English and close with a German prayer and benediction. No one will be offended if you don't mention language." She was right. No one did.

In another church the young people's organization was in charge of an evening program. That church had its services in the Low German dialect. I began to speak in my most complicated German, knowing very few people would understand. After a minute or two I said, "I believe you might understand much better in English." No one complained. The transition was no different in Bible school. When new teachers were hired, the transfer to English became automatic. Naturally, in Bible school and in the churches the young people preferred and spoke the English. When I look at my experience regarding the language transition, I acknowledge I might have been wiser to resist it more, although that would not have stalled the change. Parents and church leaders were simply not in step with their youth.

Another area of interest in my teaching was history, both Mennonite and general church history. Very closely related was missions. I believe I acquired my teaching technique from watching Mr. Schaefer, the beloved MCI teacher and principal. He couched his historical facts in interesting stories. That required a lot of homework for me, but it excited the students. I also set a new direction in teaching technique. Our other teachers leaned heavily on approaches used at Winkler Bible Institute. A section of church history was covered with 100 questions and answers. For the examination those questions and answers would be memorized since ten would be on the examination. My students too had to master facts, but they also had to elaborate on, explain and critique events. Even MCI graduates appreciated a new approach.

Memorizing a hundred historical facts was beneficial for some students, but others wanted to assess past events and understand them in terms of present developments.

Related to teaching the history of missions was the Missions Conference. That annual event was sponsored and organized together with the local Bergthaler Mennonite church. My predecessor, Mr. Hoepfner, was its originator. One of the conferences, I believe it was in 1951, had far-reaching historical fallout. Missionary W. C. Voth, a veteran missionary from China, and Gerald Stucky had done exploratory work in Colombia. Voth and Daniel Unruh, the General Conference mission board member, were our special speakers. Students, teachers and church people far beyond the Bergthaler Church became charged up about the prospect of doing a new work in Japan. The Foreign Mission Board, now called Commission on Overseas Missions (COM), had decided to send several missionaries to Japan. We extracted a commitment from the board that, if we collected a certain amount of money on the closing night, they would send another couple. Not only did our collection exceed our goal, but a number of interested men got together to commit themselves to support another missionary couple for five years. That couple happened to be Paul and Laverna Boschman. The Mission Board accepted the challenge and sent more missionaries.

Between 1950 and 1965, hundreds of students came through the school. The vast majority were hardworking, honest young people. To



A history class at Elim Bible School in 1955.

this day I am amazed at their dedication. So often middle-aged people, some already grandparents, come to me today and identify themselves as former students. Admittedly, we teachers also made our blunders. Our rules were too rigid and sometimes nonsensical. We failed to help students develop social graces in relationship to each other. Our social activities were too limited. Students were not permitted to skate together nor have enjoyable joint female-male socials. Students rightfully complained, "During the school year, the teachers do their level best to prevent any socialization. When students still manage to meet, they are disciplined. But when teachers are invited to their weddings they confess they are happy the couple found each other in school." We challenged them too much to be active missionaries or personal workers but did not help them develop social graces which are so necessary to be positive people. However, we did help those young people establish a meaningful relationship with Christ and the church. The Tuesday evening prayer meetings became very important decision-making sessions for many students.

An important component of our teaching program was extension work in the churches. Many a weekend was spent presenting programs in supporting congregations. A teacher with a single or double quartet might visit three or four churches on one weekend. I still remember drivers like John B. and Bernhard Braun of Altona and Isaak Buhler of Haskett and the contributions they made to those programs.

Frequently the teachers would spend a weekend in a church and conduct a *Bibelwoche* (Bible week). Short letters like Philippians were expounded. I recall one such experience with George A. Braun, a fellow Elim teacher. He and I had given about four presentations each



Ready for weekend visitation to churches with students in the early 1950s.

on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. After one session a man came to see us. He claimed to have been a Christian, but through some bad act or sin had fallen from grace with his church. Our Bible teaching had awakened in him the desire to return to the faith. We worked hard to help him go the route of reconciliation. His children had intermarried and their language had become English.

Several months later that man was in Altona and asked me to come to his church, the Mennonite Brethren Church, to be the speaker at his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. After getting in touch with his minister, I consented. The minister asked me to preach in the forenoon as well. Susan and I travelled 150 miles early Sunday morning. I expected to preach, but an important MB, a former minister, was present that morning. The local minister lost courage and did not even introduce us. We had our lunch in the church, then attended the celebration where I spoke in English. I believe that was a double first for that congregation: English sermon and a non-MB speaker. When they set the tables for coffee after the service, they found it hard to seat Susan and me. Finally someone found a workable, acceptable solution that would not "contaminate" the congregation. A small card table for four was set up in a corner for the local English newspaper reporter and his wife, a friend of the celebrants, and Susan and me. We enjoyed the fellowship.

I would like to introduce a host of outstanding students who made the whole Bible school ministry so challenging. That's impossible. There are far too many and I would never do justice to them all. I will confine my comments to only one, Anna Hildebrand of Blumenort. Anna came to us after graduating from the MCI. She was an A-plus student. I still recall her involvement in church history and her fascination with the development of the world-wide church. She completed her courses, went on to take teacher training and began teaching. She was gifted, educated and dedicated to her faith and her profession. Then tragedy struck. Anna developed an incurable illness. Very quickly she went into a coma and died a week later. I had the privilege of joining Rev. P. J. Schaefer, her former MCI principal and also her church bishop, in the funeral service. We rejoiced that we had been touched by her, yet wept that this flower had bloomed only for a moment. Not long ago I stood at Anna's tombstone. In this life we will not know why that committed person, with so much potential, had to be swept away so early. But there are countless others, beautiful trophies from the years of Elim Bible School, who continue to carry

the torch of faith and life beautifully. It is always a treat to meet them again.

My experiences with Elim Bible School were possible because certain people had a vision and were willing to give of their time and talents to make that vision come true. Earlier there were people like Elder Johann Bueckert of the Blumenorter Church. Later there was Diedrich Peters. He worked very hard to get the building built in 1949. Even though he was often rebuffed, he stuck with Elim Bible School. During construction a wall of wet cement collapsed and he was covered with cement to his waist. I can still see him as he shovelled hard to save the cement. There was John B. Braun of Altona and later his brother Bernhard. The most outstanding board member was Bishop David Schulz. He was the man with the vision and determination to have the vision realized. He stayed with that board through good times and bad. Even today that era of Bible training remains as a memorial to the vision and dedication of David Schulz.

When Schulz pioneered the local Bible school concept, southern Manitoba had hundreds of young people yearning for some kind of biblical education. Several decades earlier, religion had been forced out of the public school. The churches were crying for people with some kind of formal education to teach Sunday School. And, because



Faculty and graduates of Elim Bible School in the mid-1950s.

the churches were using the German language exclusively, there was a need for German-language education. Until World War II a focus on Bible and the German language seemed to meet the needs of most Elim students.

When I came to Elim that era was drawing to a close. Our closed Mennonite society had begun to break open. Other employment possibilities in urban settings, other Bible schools, colleges and universities were inviting our young people to go on and enter the exciting new world of golden but competing opportunities. Our students clamoured for some kind of recognition that might be transferrable to other schools. Elim needed some kind of accreditation. We could offer certificates beautifully printed and signed by our Bible school accrediting association but that was not enough. We tried various improvements. We lengthened the school year and added a further year to our program. We brought in more qualified faculty. But all our efforts seemed to be counterproductive. The longer school year eliminated some students who had to help on the farm. The expectation of high school graduation eliminated other potential students. We could not move toward a small college-level program because we had CMBC in Winnipeg—there was no need to duplicate what that school was doing. Besides, if we had tried that avenue our school constituency would not have supported it.

Elim Bible School has ceased to function. This is not the place to speculate on specific reasons or to lay blame. The Manitoba Conference, its last owner, is still trying to decide what to do with the beautiful campus. Those of us who had such pleasant experiences, and still nostalgically relive the past, trust the campus will find a useful niche in future Manitoba Mennonite life and activities. The real legacy of the Bible school continues to live on in its former students and their families. Every year at the Manitoba Conference sessions or at the annual Manitoba MCC meetings, former Bible school students share from the blessings they received while students at Elim.

11

The Pastor in Altona

The invitation to Elim Bible School included a call to the Bergthaler Church. In 1950 there was only one Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba. That one church consisted of approximately 20 groups, each meeting in a separate location. The participating congregations were not called churches but "locals." If you were baptized in a local like Altona, you belonged to the central church, therefore were a member of all the congregations. That is, there was only one membership list for the whole church. Although the local congregations had a limited amount of autonomy confined to local household matters, they were all integrated through the central *Bruderschaft* (Brotherhood), *Lehrdienst* (Ministerial) and *Haushaltskomitee* or *Fürsorgekomitee* (Business Committee) under the leadership of Bishop David Schulz.

The accepted tradition of the church was that each minister was a minister of the central Bergthaler Church. Until the mid-1930s it was the Bergthaler Church as a whole which elected all the ministers. They worked as ministers of the central church and were even discouraged from becoming too attached to any one local congregation. Until 1961 there was only one bishop and one assistant bishop responsible for all baptisms and communions.*

The model for that structure had been brought from Russia in 1874.

* In 1950 David Schulz was the sole bishop in the whole Bergthaler Church. He was expected to lead all baptisms and communions in all the locals. Gradually, however, that work was seen as too much for one person. In 1951 J. M. Pauls was elected as assistant bishop. In 1961 three further men, D. D. Klassen of Homewood, Ernest Wiebe of Winnipeg and Jake F. Pauls of Morden, also were ordained as bishops to assist Schulz.

When the Bergthaler Church and the Sommerfelder Church went separate ways in 1892, the model was retained by the Bergthaler group and largely continued by the first two bishops, Johann Funk and Jacob Hoepfner.

When David Schulz was ordained as bishop (*Ältester*) in 1926, his understanding was that the church would continue in that way. He accepted his responsibilities on that basis and intended to keep the model intact. And, with a few minor alterations, that is how it remained until 1968. It might have saved a lot of heartache for Bishop Schulz, many members of the congregation and for Susan and me if I had comprehended the situation fully and had committed myself never to question it.

It was the work of that Bergthaler Church to which the three men, David Schulz, J. M. Schmidt and John B. Braun, invited us in the spring of 1950. We accepted the invitation. In no way could we have envisioned then the far-reaching ramifications of our saying “yes” to the call to Altona. But it also became painfully obvious that those who invited us were not aware of all the implications and complications that would flow from the call.

To begin with, the invitation was inconsistent with the usual practice of choosing ministers. It had been an accepted, workable tradition in Russia and in Canada that the church tried to elect those men to the ministry who had a profitable farming operation or who were established school teachers. Those men then would be able to serve without salary from the church. Two notable exceptions in the Bergthaler setting were J. N. Hoepfner of Altona and W. S. Buhr of Edenberg. Buhr had been a teacher before he accepted a colporteur position with the Bible Society.

Hoepfner had been a teacher but, because of poor health, had been forced to give up teaching in the public school. He then taught at Elim Bible School and served as secretary in many committees. Beyond the five months at Elim he had no fixed income. Consequently, his family had been consigned to living on a shoestring allowance. A saying developed about the Hoepfners: “They are so poor that they use the same tea bag all week; then for Sunday they wash it, dry it, then use it over again.” It seemed when we came to Altona no one had thought about our financial status. We too appeared to be destined to reuse our tea bags.

A further complicating factor was the multiplicity of leaders and leadership tasks within the Bergthaler Church. Although Bishop David

Schulz* was responsible for the whole Bergthaler Church of Manitoba with its many local congregations, he also was the acknowledged leader in the Altona setting. The tradition had been established that he led all local meetings in Altona. When we came to Altona in 1950 there were several other ministers in the area besides Bishop Schulz. J. W. Schmidt, ordained as a visiting evangelist, lived in the village of Altona south of town and served as a visiting evangelist over a large region. Closest to being a pastor for the Altona group was Peter P. Kehler, a retired school teacher.

Another minister who had been in and out of Altona for many years before and after 1950 was David H. Loewen and his wife Anna. Loewen had attended Winnipeg Bible Institute and the Missionary Medical Institute in Toronto. Through many years he indomitably pursued his goal of going to Africa as a missionary. His and his wife's health caused them to be rejected by all overseas boards. He was a weak pulpit speaker but strong in prayer and personal work. By sheer determination the Loewens went to Jamaica on their own expense to work with the Afro-Jamaicans until poor health forced them to return to Canada. Today, several decades later, there are eight Jamaican congregations under the auspices of the (Old) Mennonite Church Mission Board who look upon David H. Loewen as their spiritual father.

Christian Education

Immediately upon arrival in Altona I was drawn into a vast labyrinth of ministries. One of the important responsibilities was assisting with the local church catechism class. At first I shared this with J. W. Schmidt. Between 1950 and 1971 I taught or participated in teaching the church catechism or baptism preparatory classes 17 times. During

* David Schulz, born in 1895, grew up in the Altona area and received his education in the MEI (a school comparable to the MCI located in Altona until 1927) and the Winkler Bible School. He married Tien Friesen, a neighbour's daughter, and began his public life as a school teacher. Very early he showed deep spiritual concerns for the church. In 1920, at the age of 26, he was elected to the ministry in the Bergthaler Mennonite Church. In 1926 he was ordained bishop of the whole church. Schulz was very energetic and gifted. He preached strong evangelistic sermons and became the beloved minister for weddings and funerals. He worked hard for the CO boys during World War II and served as chairman of the Elders Committee. Schulz was a strong advocate for Bible school training and for maintenance of the German language. He held his position as bishop until illness curbed his activities in the early 1960s. He died in 1976.

the early years the classes were taught on Sunday mornings as part of the regular worship service with the whole congregation in attendance. That was my annual challenge. Because the same audience listened in every year, I was obliged to work through my teaching material annually in such a way that the congregation remained challenged. During our years in Altona we usually had large classes and several hundred people were added to the church. During most of that time David Schulz did all the baptizing. After 1961 D. D. Klassen, Ernest Wiebe and J. F. Pauls could be assigned to come to Altona to lead the baptismal service. Because I worked so intimately with those young people, I regretted not being able to serve them with baptism. Although I assisted, it was only after 1968, when all ministers within the Bergthaler church were given authority to do so, that I was authorized to baptize. I had to accept the firmly established tradition that this was done by the bishop and that the bishop lived in Altona, preached challenging sermons every year and was an exceptionally likable person. I do not recall that I overtly planned to change the pattern.

Fortunately the participants in the catechism classes were new every year and over the years I could improve on my earlier approaches and mistakes. I soon learned not to ask participants immediately when they applied for the class whether they wanted to be baptized. Their decisions for faith in Christ and baptism were much more mature if they made them gradually after some Scriptural studies. One policy was to visit every participant once or twice. It was a hard and fast rule that two members of the Ministerial* were to be present for those visits. I enjoyed going with Bishop Schulz but visits with one of the deacons were more trying. He had experienced a Pauline-type, stormy conversion and seemed to think only such conversions were genuine. His other problem was that he knew every participant's parents and grandparents. Too often he projected the families' perceived characteristics and faults onto the young catechumens. That made discussion difficult. Generally, however, those visits were very fruitful experiences.

To the best of my recollection, in my 21 years in Altona we rejected only two young people who wanted to be baptized. In both cases the issue was conduct. In both cases the results were tragic. They withdrew totally from church participation. Only recently I met one of those

* Each local had a ministerial consisting of the ordained ministers and deacons within that local. Throughout most of my years in Altona the Ministerial consisted of Schulz, myself, three or four other ministers and three or four deacons.

men, who is now living in Winnipeg, and apologized for our judgemental rigidity. Through one of his mother's friends I had learned that the family blamed the Altona ministers that he was still outside the church 25 years later. I don't know where the other person stayed.

Only a few years ago I sent a note to another participant of those years and apologized. I had discovered that she too had dropped out of the church, blaming her catechism experience for her cynicism regarding faith and the church. She claimed I had not believed her testimony. Although she had been baptized, her resentment remained. I did not even recall the incident. She accepted my letter of apology and is growing more positive.

A very fruitful part of my Altona ministry was the Christian education component. There my roles at Elim and in the church came together. At Elim I taught in the area of Sunday School teacher training. Thus I worked closely with Altona Sunday School teachers, most of whom were attending or had attended Elim Bible School. In the earlier years, before so many local responsibilities fell on me, I also was part of the administration of the Sunday School, several years as superintendent. I tried hard to help the teachers understand their lessons. Many times I worked through the 13 lessons of a quarter with the teachers to give them a general outline. I stressed that every lesson should lead to the next lesson. If the teachers understood the continuity of the quarter, it was possible that pupils in class would catch it as well. I also worked hard at getting more men involved. The tradition was that women taught the younger children and men the older ones. Increasingly we managed to get some men to take lower classes and women to teach upper grades. I remember the year when a tall strong man, a road construction machine operator, taught a kindergarten class, and a woman, a housewife and former school teacher, taught a youth class. Both did very well.

During the earlier years the Rudnerweider Church* used our church premises. It held worship services once a month and provided a good portion of the Sunday School teaching staff. Its background in the revival movements of the 1930s encouraged a very aggressive approach. Several of the teachers wanted to know the exact time and

* The Rudnerweider Church was formed in 1937 as a result of the revival or renewal movements of the 1930s in southern Manitoba. It essentially grew out of the Sommerfelder Church. In 1959 it officially changed its name to the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, usually shortened to EMMC.

place of everyone's conversion experience. At the time we had a retired school teacher on the Sunday School staff. Mrs. Anna Braun had a long fruitful record, both as public school and as Sunday School teacher. Now those men came to the conclusion that she was not born again. They asked me to examine her faith. I did meet with her but did not confront her with their question. Her testimony and her love were very evident in her faith and lifestyle. When our son Gerald was a small boy he came home with a story about a woman in town who had spoken to him. When we wanted to know who the woman was, he didn't know her name. He said she was the one in Sunday School who was like Jesus. That was Anna Braun.

A dimension of my church ministry which did not seem to function according to my wishes was the weekly Bible study and prayer meeting. I tried various approaches. We had topical discussions, theological studies, or the regular study of specific biblical passages. The group just would not grow to more than 25 or 30 participants. One year I made the following motion at the annual congregational meeting: "Be it resolved that we terminate our weekly Bible study and prayer meeting." There was instant opposition. When we finally voted, the vast majority of the church voted to continue as before. Next Wednesday I expected a large attendance at Bible study. The group was the same. But the church still could feel good that "we" had Bible study and prayer meetings.

Weddings and Funerals

One of the interesting dimensions in my 21 years in the Altona Bergthaler Church was the work with young people who were planning to get married. At that time we did not know all the latest pre-marriage counselling techniques. However, as the years went by, I did more and more counselling. In the late 1960s the Altona churches designed a joint program and we made use of more professional counsellors. We had as many as 18 couples in the class at one time. I did not officiate at as many weddings as might have been expected in a large church. Bishop David Schulz was the beloved marrying parson from the day of his ordination in 1920 until his illness in 1963. That was true not only for Altona but also for the other "locals." During the later years Altona had another desirable minister, David F. Friesen, our youth worker. He married many of the young people with whom he worked. Although I did not keep track, I officiated at well over 150 weddings.

Some of them were unforgettable experiences. Anne Loewen was the organist for most weddings so we developed a clear pattern of working together. As she played her selections of introductory music, I waited in the small office north of the choir loft. Then, just before the couple came down the aisle on their chosen music, Anne gave me a cue on the organ so I would know when to enter. At one particular wedding I was waiting for my cue when I heard Anne change her music rather abruptly. Without finishing the piece she was playing she began the wedding march. I quickly walked into the church toward the pulpit and saw that the bridal couple was already halfway down the aisle. They had walked in without waiting for their music. Later I asked the groom why he hadn't waited for the proper music. He replied, "I was ready and couldn't wait." My dreams at night also provided some rather comical marrying experiences. One which left me in a sweat was when Anne Loewen gave me her organ cue to enter and I discovered I was only half dressed.

Perhaps my most unusual wedding took place away from Altona. The groom was from our church, but his bride had grown up in the Old Colony Church, although she had already transferred into our congregation. She was a beautiful young woman. When she entered the church, her long bridal veil trailed behind her and she carried a large bouquet of red roses. When she was about halfway down the aisle her mother, who was sitting in the front row, turned around, saw her daughter and began to scream. It was no ordinary scream. It was loud, shrill and penetrating. Her rather meek, obedient husband tried to place his hand over her mouth. But it was no use. In desperation he grabbed her, took her in his arms and carried her out of the church. They met the bridal couple just before they reached the pulpit. Her screams could be heard throughout the church until she was in the car and the car door was closed.

We proceeded with the wedding. As was the tradition at the time, the wedding lunch followed immediately. The bridal couple and the rest of us had just begun to eat when a harried messenger came to the bridal table and told the bride, "Come home immediately. Your mother is dying." As before, the bride lost none of her serenity and simply said, "Mother isn't dying. She is only pretending." Her new husband's father and I tried to persuade her to go home. Finally she consented. The groom's father and I went ahead of them to the parents' farm home. We found the woman lying on a sofa, reciting hymns from an old chorale book. I went to her, placed a finger on her pulse and

discovered a healthy heartbeat. When she opened her eyes and saw the white-shirted minister she began to scream again. I had to leave the room.

By that time the young couple had driven onto the yard. The bride had changed into a cotton house dress. "What went wrong?" I asked, "Did your mother not know you would be dressed in white?" She replied, "You cannot discuss things with mother." She seemed to be right. By that time she was very angry and said, "Mother spoiled my wedding." That appeared to be obvious. I then took her by the arm and almost dragged her to her mother. Then came the climax. Her mother looked at her and, in a clear controlled voice, said, "You have committed my sin today. All my life I have fantasized about being married in a white dress. But I resisted the temptation. You did not resist and have now committed my sin."

After that mother and daughter began to talk. I left the room, went home and had supper with my family. Suddenly it hit me like a ton of bricks. That young couple was not legally married. In the confusion I had missed having them and their witnesses sign the legal wedding bans which, at that time, was not yet done as part of the marriage service. Quickly we gathered up our children to try and catch the pair before they crossed the border into the U.S. as an unmarried couple. We found them in his parental yard, playing the traditional wedding games. She was again in her bridal apparel, radiant and happy, as though nothing unusual had happened. Quickly we called their witnesses together and had all the papers signed, even though legally that should have been done several hours earlier.

I can truthfully say that I worked very hard on my wedding sermons. While preparing I thought of three different audiences. First, there were the parents and the married people of the church. I tried to give systematic biblical instructions on husband-and-wife relationships and family living. Then there were the young people who were present in large numbers at weddings. For them I tried to lay a foundation for married life. Although I never addressed them directly, I knew from experience that they were listening. Finally, there was the bridal couple. My years of experience taught me they hardly ever remembered what was said at the wedding. Therefore, I focused more on the younger and older groups, anticipating that the younger group would in time also stand before the marriage altar.

Two special phenomena affected my experiences with marriages. Before I came to Altona there had been pressure to have very short

weddings. A free-lance minister living in the area would have a prayer, read a Scripture portion, accept their vows, have someone sing a solo and introduce them as married. The couple could walk into the church and be out in eight to ten minutes. By the time we came to Altona a negative reaction to that kind of wedding had begun to surface in the church, resulting in the era of wedding rules. I have sat many hours with ministers from Winkler and Plum Coulee to work on guidelines for weddings. The rules became very detailed and too strict. The sermon was to be 20 minutes long. There were to be at least two songs from the hymnal. The couple could be attended by only two people plus a flower girl and ring bearer. And the couple was to sit during the service. Although the rules were excessive, they brought sanity to the marriage fiasco. A decade later they were no longer necessary and young couples could plan their wedding together with the ministers. The interesting result of that era of rules was that the Mennonite Brethren congregation from which the free-lance minister came accepted many of the principles of our rules.

The second phenomenon which affected weddings during our 21 years in Altona was the transition from German to English. Before our forebears migrated to Prussia they used the North German-Netherlands Low German. In Prussia a different Low German dialect and High German became the language of conversation and worship. In Russia the Low German developed more fully and the High German became the established language of worship. That language pattern was brought to Canada. The 1920s' migration strengthened the use of High German. Many powerful teachers like Gerhard H. Peters, long-time principal of Mennonite Collegiate Institute, fought valiantly to establish German as the language of the Mennonites. He wrote a poem which compared the German language to the dikes that keep the waters of the Fraser River from flooding the Mennonite settlements of the Fraser Valley. When the dikes break the settlement is inundated. He maintained that if we would lose our sacred language, the Mennonite cause would be lost.

I recall a lengthy discussion with him in 1952. He became very defensive. Later I regretted that I had challenged my former principal. The incident that precipitated our discussion was his appeal to me to join the society he was organizing at the time. The organization was called the Society for the Preservation of the German Mother Tongue.

Without doubt, German is a rich and beautiful language well worth knowing. Since our ministry in Germany Susan and I have learned to

appreciate a good German even more than we did during our years in Altona. It's true that many valuable attributes of our culture are rooted in or expressed by the German language. But that was not the issue of my discussion with Gerhard Peters. I could not agree with him that we could save our young people for the faith and the Mennonite Church only if they spoke German. I was fully convinced that it would be impossible to win the descendants of the 1870s' migration for the German language and culture. And the young people of the 1920s' migration were accepting English even faster. Unfortunately, my good principal and I could not find a common denominator in our understanding of language.

Bishop David Schulz took a position that leaned in a similar direction. He believed strongly that German should always remain the language of worship. In fact, the preservation of the German language was one of his strong planks in establishing Elim Bible School. However, our young people began to speak English. Increasingly they put on pressure that English be used in worship. But they could not control the Sunday morning worship services which were planned by the ministers and the older people. They also could not control the membership meetings and its decisions.

However, there was one service young people felt they could control. They could ask the officiating minister at their weddings to speak in English. Many parents resisted that as well. They did not dare go against the tradition of their church and friends. They wanted their daughters married in German. The daughters got around that. They would ask a second minister to preach an English wedding sermon. I have spoken in English at many weddings, even when a local minister officiated in German. Then I began to officiate in English.

In one instance the conflict over language forced the wedding into a Mennonite Brethren church building. If I had refused to speak in English, the couple would have found another minister, probably from the MB church. Therefore, I do not believe that I hastened the transition. I believe I helped many couples have their weddings within our churches rather than going to other churches. Very quickly that transition was complete and all Mennonite churches were open to conducting their weddings in English.

If weddings facilitated the transition to the English language, funerals provided the leading edge. A review of my funeral sermons shows that I had more of them in English than in German. So often at a grandparent's funeral the request came to have one sermon in English.

The scenario usually went something like this. A wayward son or daughter or a distant granddaughter who had not learned German would be at the funeral. In order to include them in the grandparent's funeral there had to be an English meditation. Naturally, the English message was always called a meditation and not a sermon.

The power of that dilemma was symbolized for me by an event which took place a number of years after we left Altona. One day when I was out of the office, my secretary took a phone call for me. When I returned she informed me that Bishop David Schulz had called and wanted me to call back. I found that very strange. By then Schulz had been quite ill for several years and, to my knowledge, no longer used the phone. Immediately I called him and he answered in a firm voice, "Tien (his wife) died. I want you to have the funeral—and in English." That was very interesting. He had always resisted English services. Something had happened. His grandchildren did not communicate in German. He clearly understood the problem. I was happy to accommodate him and his family and take the English part of the service.

I kept no records of the number of funerals I conducted. I recall one year when I counted 17 funeral sermons. Not all of them were for our church members. Relationships which had developed through my Bible school work and a large family network meant that I frequently spoke at funerals in other churches. Many funerals were very sad so I intentionally focused on hope and the meaning of life. Although I tried to invite people to faith in Christ, I did not use scare tactics nor did I use pressure on a captive audience. I always considered it distasteful when ministers had people cornered around the coffin and then made them squirm. I believed it was much more inviting for unbelievers to see that the Christian faith had worked, that it had brought meaning to life, rather than for them to be scared by hell.

Preparing sermons for funerals was a very educational experience. Difficult funerals provided one type of challenge. I especially recall the service for Ted and Linie Friesen's baby which died immediately after birth. I struggled hard with the matter of innocence. Why was that baby safe in the arms of Jesus? On what scriptural basis could I say that the baby was not lost? That meant Bible study, prayer and honesty. I still recall how happy I was at that funeral to tell the parents that Christ's sacrifice had covered their baby. It was included in his all-encompassing redemption.

Funerals of older faith disciples who, when death came, just wanted to see what was on the other side, brought out a different aspect of life

and faith. The funerals of Mrs. David Stobbe and Mrs. D. W. Friesen were examples. Funerals also could result in some unusual experiences and relationships. The body of a certain man was brought to Altona by his wife, a former Altona resident. I was asked to speak. Since I had never met him I could not be personal. I knew nothing about the man and his relationship to God. After the funeral one of our senior members in the church commented, "You almost sounded like a liberal minister today."

That funeral led to another, that of his wife. Not long after her husband's funeral she came back from the west, deathly ill. I was asked to visit her in the hospital. She was dying of leukaemia. The first thing she said to me was, "I will die and I am not ready. I killed someone." I protested, "I don't understand. You did not really kill a person." Before she could say more she went into a coma. She was rushed to St. Boniface Hospital in Winnipeg. A day or two later I went to see her. Blood transfusions had given her new strength. Immediately she confessed, "I killed someone."

Now I neither protested nor acted surprised. I simply asked her to tell her story. She then shared about her early teen years in Altona. She had dated a railroad worker and became pregnant. Her boyfriend advised her to abort the child by taking some kind of concoction. She said she drank the liquid, got very sick and, in the process, lost her child. I felt like telling her that the miscarriage might have been coincidental. Her conscience told her that she had killed a human being and that had to be dealt with.

For some 50 years she repeatedly had told the Lord what she had done and begged for forgiveness. I assured her that the Lord had answered her prayers and had forgiven her long ago. She couldn't accept that assurance. Then I remembered the passage from Matthew where Jesus says to Peter, "Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven." I said to her, "I forgive your sin."

She believed, accepted it and thanked God for forgiveness. Then her face clouded over again and she said, "I am still an excommunicated person." In the 1920s, anyone who married an English person, was excommunicated. I gave her my hand and told her, "I welcome you back into the Bergthaler Church."

Shortly after, she died in peace. For the sake of her family I did not tell the whole story at the funeral. However, I did share that I had accepted her back into the church before she died. For me that was a happy funeral. I knew the Gospel still worked.

Crusades and Evangelism

One of the perplexing faith journeys I made in Altona was in the area of evangelism. How can a Christian worker best help others find a meaningful relationship with Christ? As a youth I had been immersed in a fundamentalist understanding of saving souls. Although my own conversion experience in that style had not been positive, I still remained in that camp. The books I read were closely related to R. A. Torrey's major textbook, *How to Save Souls*. However, the outcome of catechism classes pointed in a different direction. My best experiences were with young people who made a deliberate decision for Christ as a result of studying God's Word and accepting the truth of the Gospel. Among the hundreds of young people in my catechism classes, very few experienced radical conversions.

My faith in undiluted, evangelical evangelism was further shaken by the mass evangelists who came to Altona at the invitation of area churches. The first of those professionals was George R. Brunk. He had formed his own company or society and conducted evangelism very much like a business. In technique he followed in the footsteps of America's great evangelists like Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday. Brunk preached a sound Gospel which was directed at the whole person, but he too based his success on the altar call. That created many new problems for us. The difficulties included two areas. In those days Brunk was still tied to the Old Mennonite* dress code which somehow crept into his invitations. That affected and confused the women who were not acquainted with Old Mennonite traditions. He implied that women should really be dressed like Old Mennonites with a particular kind of dress and head covering. The second difficulty had its basis in the larger evangelical evangelism movement. Becoming new in Christ was understood as an instant event. We discovered that young children and women with certain kinds of emotional conditions were very susceptible to the call and easily answered the invitation to come forward. Very few boys and hardly any men responded.

I served as secretary for several crusades of the Southern Manitoba Crusade for Christ. I noticed that the way in which people made

* George R. Brunk was a minister from the Virginia Conference, one of the groups which form the larger Mennonite Church, at that time commonly referred to as "Old Mennonites" to distinguish them from the General Conference Mennonite Church. Within the Mennonite Church there was, at least at that time, an emphasis on plain dress for both men and women and head coverings for women.

decisions at the Brunk meetings became a model for all the crusades. For one thing, men were hardly ever affected by them. Secondly, we discovered that the same people tended to come forward again a few years later. We also learned that those successful evangelists were very much concerned with how the offerings were handled. With the Janz Team we had to make new arrangements after almost every service. During one crusade, when our daughter Norma answered the call and a certain person took her into the prayer room, I silently prayed, "Lord, don't let her be harmed." I wasn't thinking of physical or sexual harm. Her counsellor was above reproach. I simply had become somewhat cynical about the approach we were using to help people find Christ. I still recall the day when Jacob Quiring, leading pastor of the Winkler Mennonite Brethren Church, and I made the joint motion that our organization be dissolved and that our tent for evangelistic meetings be given to a foreign missionary in Latin America. For the time being that kind of evangelism had run its course in southern Manitoba. Evangelism had been given back to the congregation.

The organization, Child Evangelism Incorporated, demonstrated to what extreme ends the emphasis on sudden conversion could be taken. That group worked in Altona for some time. Somehow they attempted to foist a stormy Pauline conversion on every child. The ultimate came when one woman told us that she was training four-year-old children to win two-and-a-half-year olds to commit their lives to Christ. Bishop David Schulz and I were in total agreement when we asked the organization to leave the Altona people to the churches which carried responsibility for the whole family and for all ages. Some of their supporters felt extremely upset. We were branded as leaders who were against the Gospel and conversion.

Bishop David Schulz

Bishop David Schulz had been instrumental in creating in me a desire to be part of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church. As a youth I was challenged by his preaching. Schulz preached a positive, balanced Gospel that included new life in Christ and discipleship. Behind the pulpit he was warm and attractive. I decided his was the church to which I wanted to belong. From the time I joined the church in my teen years I admired him greatly and enjoyed his sermons and his leadership very much. I almost worshipped the ground on which he walked. I was so dependent on him that, when the MCI graduating class of 1942

elected me to be chairman of the new alumni organization, I asked his counsel before I accepted. Schulz had been very much part of the movement to get me to leave the employment of the United Church and accept the appointment to go to Mexico. It was Schulz who got me to teach in the Bible school for that one year after our return from Mexico. It was also Schulz who got us to come back to Altona after CMBC. Bishop and Mrs. Schulz also had been very close to Susan's family. At one point Susan had worked in the Schulz home as a helper with the children. It was Schulz who recruited Susan to work in the Judge Adamson home. When we came to Altona I never could have dreamed that anything could or would disrupt that harmony. I wish it never had. Much of it was my fault but, somehow, I heard a different drummer.

David Schulz was a good man who worked very hard. He gave himself completely to the church he loved. He was an advocate for the conscientious objectors and others who needed help. He was admired by young and old and, as long as his health permitted, very many bridal couples, as well as their parents, wanted him to be the officiating minister at their weddings. He remained popular with the membership-at-large through his long term of leadership. But he had some characteristics which created serious problems for those who worked closely with him. Things simply had to go his way. He would be very helpful as long as people agreed with him. However, if there was disagreement, he could be very difficult. When I began to work with him in 1950 I never envisioned that we would clash.

One factor affected the direction of leadership in Altona from the beginning. Shortly after our arrival in Altona in 1950, D. W. Friesen, a local businessman and long-standing deacon of the church, informed me, "Dü best ons Leida" (You are our leader). Although Friesen was officially retired, he let it be known that he was promoting my leadership. His two sons, David K. and Ted, and many other leading men of the church influenced thinking in that direction.

But Schulz and I also were very different. My views on various aspects of the church and leadership were not always in line with his thinking. Differences developed around youth work,^{*} language and constitutional development in the Bergthaler Church. It was during the early years of our Altona ministry that the local high school put on the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, *The Mikado*. Since I was the young-

* The constitutional debates in the Bergthaler Church are described in Chapter 12.

est minister in Altona and had a close relationship with the church young people and the high school, I was asked by several young people what I thought of their participation in the musical. I don't recall my exact answer, but I know I did not discourage them. I learned later that my answer, in fact, had encouraged them. Included among those young people were two of the Schulz children, Menno and Linda. They went home and apparently confronted their father with the good news that Mr. Gerbrandt supported them in their desire to sing in the musical. That evening Schulz called me and was very upset. He told me in no uncertain terms to stay out of Altona family affairs. I was to confine my activities to preaching and teaching. Children belonged to the parents. There was absolutely no discussion. I felt he had been condescending in his comments and was totally devastated and deeply hurt. I thought our relationship was damaged to the extent that it would affect our mutual ministry. When I next met him he was as friendly as ever and wanted me to work as before. But something had happened between us. A golden cord had been severed. I knew then how our relationship was to be. If I had known before how adamantly opposed he had been to that musical I would not have encouraged the young people to participate.

Schulz continued to accept me and trust me. Often our relationship with Frank H. Epp played into our differences. For many years Frank was our youth leader. He was active as editor of the *Canadian Mennonite* and, since 1957, had been the speaker on several radio programs sponsored by our church. Schulz and Epp were opposites and too often I was caught in the middle as mediator. I recall when Frank and the youth organization ordered the new *Mennonite Hymnal*. I too wish Frank would have asked the church before he ordered the hymnals for the youth. That is how it should have been. The boxes of books had been in the church for a while already and the youth wanted to have them placed in the pews for occasional use on Sunday mornings. But no formal decision had been made. The evening I asked the Ministerial, which met in our home, for permission to use the hymnal for a certain Sunday morning, was a disaster. I was admonished severely by Bishop Schulz.

We also clashed badly regarding the General Conference. I sided with those who wanted to be part of it. Older Bergthaler ministers like J. M. Pauls, Winkler, and D. D. Klassen, Homewood, had long advocated joining the Conference. D. W. Friesen, a veteran Altona deacon and General Conference treasurer, also favoured joining. Younger

ministers like J. F. Pauls, Morden, and Ernest Wiebe, Winnipeg, were speaking for it. Brother Schulz remained adamantly opposed. Those were difficult days. The *Bergthaler Gemeindeblatt*, the church paper, carried many of the arguments in the discussion. I now see that many of Bishop Schulz's concerns were very valid. But our position was that we should be part of the discussion and work toward a solution.

The pain of transition for David Schulz became very clear in 1962 at my installation as leader of the Altona Church. I vividly recall that day. The Ministerial, together with the church council, had prepared a program. My message was to be a tribute to the many years of David Schulz's contribution to the Altona congregation. He was to preach my installation sermon. After my message Schulz began to speak. He never mentioned me nor did he even refer to some kind of installation. After he sat down the congregation was very silent. Mrs. Schulz, who was sitting in the back under the balcony, got up and said, "You don't know how hard it is for my husband to do what he was asked to do. He could not do it. On his behalf I wish the Gerbrandts God's blessing in the ministry to which the church has called them."

When she sat down, the atmosphere was electric. The chairman brought the service to a close and invited everyone to come down to the basement for coffee and refreshments. Many in that gathering felt sorry for Schulz; others felt sorry for us. But our situations were very different. He was ill, tired and phasing out, and we were phasing in.

When Susan and I went to the basement we decided we would not sit at the head table, the place of honour. We quickly decided that was the Schulz's night. We would allow the people to focus on them. We headed for the kitchen, picked up a kettle and poured coffee.

In his own short, unpublished memoirs, written from 1960 to 1964, David Schulz does not reflect on the difficulties nor on the changes that took place in the Bergthaler Church during his time of leadership. After 1962 his spirit and body were unable to function as before. For many years he sat in a chair. When he could no longer attend the Bergthaler services in the church, they were piped into his home so that he and Tien could listen to them.

Throughout that period we related to each other in various ways. I often consulted with him and, when I wrote the history of the Bergthaler Church, I asked him for material. When that history was published he asked his sister-in-law to read it to him from cover to cover. Then he invited me to his home. He commented briefly on certain flaws and said I should have consulted with him more frequently. He gave

me some materials which I suspected he had, but had not offered to me before. What touched me most was his portrait on the wall behind him. Into it he had stuck a picture of me. From then on I felt that the old warmth we had for each other had been restored.

The tensions with Schulz were, in reality, not a clash between me and Bishop Schulz. They were part of the breaking down of old established traditions which had functioned well since 1837 under the leadership of five dedicated, hard-working bishops. Now new wine-skins which appeared more appropriate for a new era, yet had not been tried, had presented themselves. I don't know how heaven will be. Maybe Brother Schulz and I will be able to talk about our problems then in the light of new celestial insight.

Transition to the English Language and Formation of the Altona Mennonite Church

One of the difficult episodes during my Altona ministry was the development which spawned the Altona Mennonite Church. That came at a time when the church was in the midst of struggle with the transition to the English language. Sunday School had been in English since before we arrived in Altona, but the Sunday morning worship service had remained German, although it already also had a meditation and a hymn or two in English.

The specific matter which brought issues to a head was an assignment which our Education Commission gave the chairman, Frank H. Epp. He was asked to develop a position paper for the building of proper facilities for Christian education and youth work in the church. Epp, Ted Friesen, chairman of the congregation, and I frequently, over coffee, had discussed our goals for Christian education and we were in close agreement. Personally I supported many of Epp's proposals. But I wanted to work toward that vision over a period of years. When Epp presented his paper, it became clear he wanted to realize them immediately through a new church. While he worked on that project, he had become convinced that a new English church in Altona would meet the needs of Christian education more adequately than the addition of a Christian education wing to the Bergthaler Church building. Our ministerial body, including Bishop Schulz, was not in favour.

I was caught in the middle. On the one hand Ted Friesen was one of my closest friends in the church and I very much admired Frank Epp and his work in our church. The three of us had worked hard

together in developing our vision. On the other hand, I was committed to the Bergthaler Church and, in spite of differences and even tensions, to Bishop Schulz. The following days were extremely difficult. Understandably, Schulz was intensely opposed and considered Epp's actions subversive. He wanted to excommunicate Frank and Ted. We had a very serious confrontation when I opposed that action. One must understand Schulz's hard stance in the context of the long and rich tradition he embodied. All the bishops in Prussia and Russia, and thus far in Canada, had defended church polity as they understood it. Schulz had led the whole church for more than 30 years based on a commitment he had made at his ordination to defend the church against all dangers and lead it honestly and faithfully. Epp had been in Altona for only six years and had made no commitment through ordination. Although the need for an English church in Altona was the official reason given for the desire for a new church, personal tensions between Schulz and Epp were not irrelevant. I had a number of heated debates with Schulz about how to respond.

In the meantime, discussions among those interested in beginning a new church continued. On March 31, 1962, twenty-one persons met and decided to follow Epp's vision and move ahead. People in the



Turning sod for the new Education Building in 1965 assisted by D.G. Friesen and Jake Friesen. Bishop Schulz, who was already sick and disabled, had the dedicatory prayer from his car. Courtesy: Red River Valley Echo

congregation knew of my interest in some of Epp's proposals and wondered whether I would become part of the new group. At one point, Epp and Friesen officially asked me to become pastor of the new group. Some people in the congregation waited to make their decision until mine was known. But I simply could not leave the church and people who had called me and to whom I had committed myself.

I believe only six people initially asked for a transfer when the Altona Mennonite Church started. Several joined later. The church moved forward and established itself as a recognized Altona congregation. It has had a positive influence, although it did not develop as fast as its founders had anticipated. Its heavy emphasis on academic professionalism prevented it from becoming a grassroots movement. Its presence challenged other congregations, including the Bergthaler Church. Ted Friesen had been our church chairman for several years. I had come to lean heavily on him and felt the loss keenly when he left. To this day I am glad that the Friesens, the Epps and we were able to continue to relate positively to each other.

The change to an English worship service in the Bergthaler Church continued to evolve gradually. We introduced various English items into the morning service. Those included special singing, English hymns and Scripture readings. Then came the time when we had two short sermons. That arrangement seemed to please no one and did not meet the needs of the young people. In October 1968, I presented a plan to church council for a total change. For the months of November, December and January our worship service from 10:45 to 12:00 noon would be totally in English. During the Sunday School hour, from 9:30 to 10:30, there would a German service. The Christmas morning worship would be bilingual; the service on the day after Christmas would be in German. Council agreed to accept the proposal and the suggestion that it be presented to the congregation as the church council plan. I then introduced my proposal to the congregation during a Sunday morning service. No questions or public discussion were allowed at that point.

The congregational meeting on the future took place at the membership meeting in February. All went smoothly until the discussion. Six or seven people spoke against what had been done. No one spoke in favour. It appeared the vote would be negative. Yet in the ballot vote 93 percent voted in favour. We promised the church that the language question would henceforth not be an item on the membership agenda.

Everything worked well except for one senior member. He would

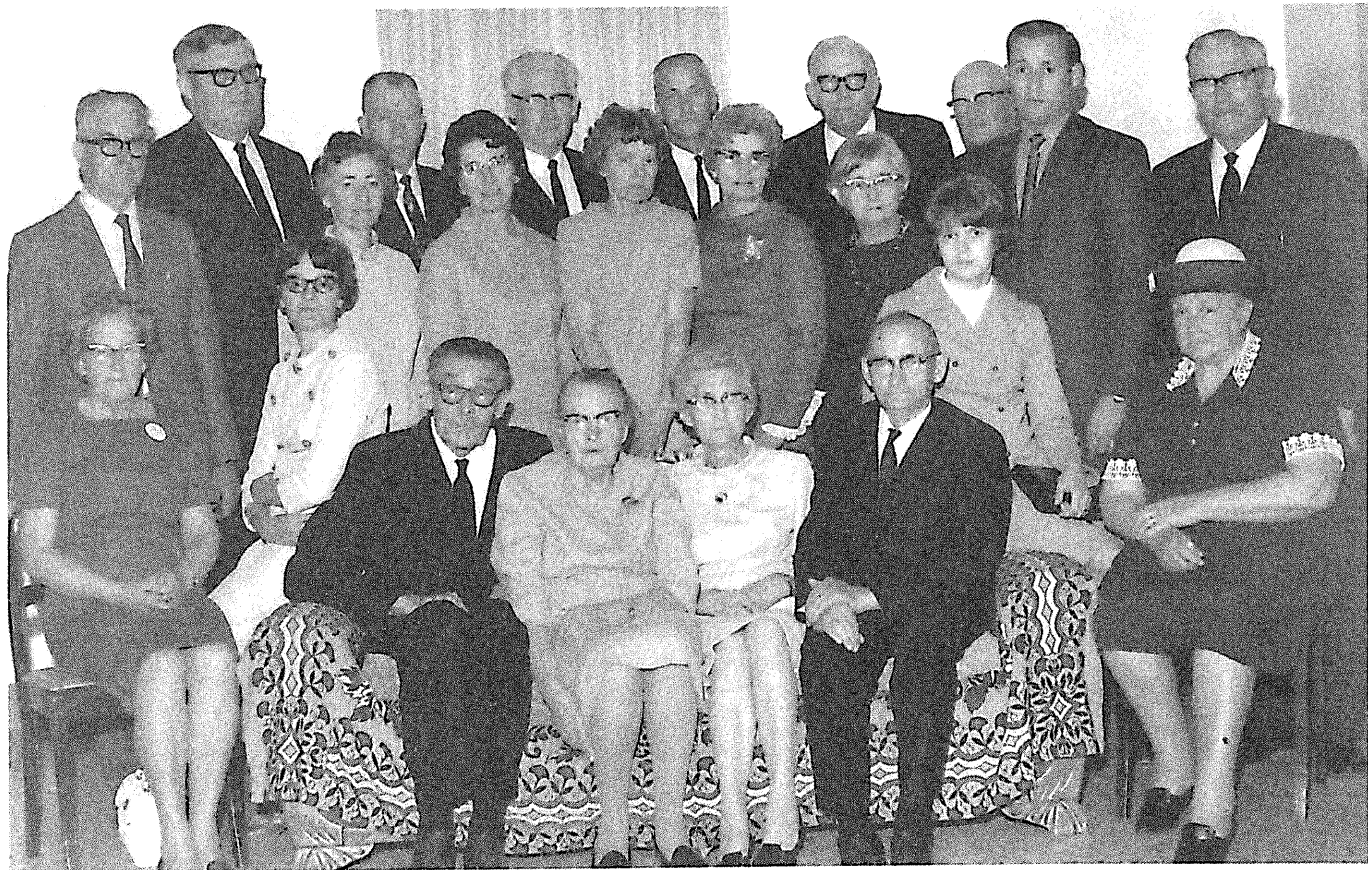
attend the German service, remain in his seat until after the call to worship and opening prayer of the English service, then he would rise and very deliberately walk out. His footsteps were quite heavy. In the beginning we paused in the service as he left. Eventually we ignored him. After several weeks of protest he came to my church office. Quietly he said, "You know how much I was opposed to the change to English. I have changed my mind. I now realize that if we didn't have the German service during the Sunday School hour, we would lose that too. Please don't place the language issue on the agenda again." From then on we had peace. That arrangement became a model for many churches in the Conference.

Relating to the Church

Our 21 years in Altona cannot really be compared with the current understanding of pastoral ministry. I always worked in the context of the *Lehrdienst*, a ministerial body of ministers and deacons. Until his illness Bishop Schulz was the clear leader of the Ministerial. Ministers like Peter P. Kehler, J. W. Schmidt, David H. Loewen, Diedrich Neudorf, David F. Friesen, George Neufeld and Albert Schmidt were part of that group. There were strong deacons like John B. Braun, David B. Friesen, D. H. Loewen, John D. Reimer and Menno Funk. Deacons like John B. Braun also preached at times.

My role in the congregation and Ministerial changed during my stay in Altona. At first I was largely an unpaid assistant to Bishop Schulz. Since Schulz's role in the central church required that he devote much time to other locals, I gradually became recognized as leader of the Altona congregation. Partial salary, however, only began in 1961. This increased gradually and by 1965 I was on full salary. Before long members began to expect their salaried minister to do more preaching. I recall the Monday morning I came to the town post office and met one of our members. He asked, "Why did you have Brother X preach yesterday? Whom are we paying anyway?" Leadership meant keeping that group of dedicated people working together. Decisions were rarely made that had not been shared with the group. Although I prepared the preaching schedules, it was approved by all before it was adopted.

I received a lot of support from a circle of dedicated families. They included our long-time Sunday School superintendent, the electrician Ed Stoesz. He and his wife Sara gave many hours to the work in the



The ministerial body of the Altona Bergthaler Mennonite Church in 1969 (front row on sofa): Bishop David and Tina Schulz, Deacon John B. and Anna Braun; (second and third rows): Minister Abram and Anne Born; Minister and council chairman George and Linda Neufeld; Deacon Menno and Margaret Funk; Leading minister Henry J. and Susan Gerbrandt; Assistant minister David F. and Mary Friesen; Deacon Diedrich and Lena Loewen; Deacon David B. and Susie Friesen; Minister Albert and Marie Schmidt, Minister Diedrich and Sara Neudorf. This powerful leadership group gave the church stability for many years.

church. There was deacon D. H. Loewen, Co-op manager, and his wife Lena. Susan and Lena worked together in the leadership of the Mary Martha Ladies group and we and the Loewens had many late evening coffees together. Deacon John Reimer and his wife Mary always gave us much support. John was a Rawleigh dealer. He had to work hard to make ends meet, yet always came for our Ministerial and Sunday School meetings. After many a late and tense evening John and Mary would invite us for coffee. There were Bernie and Tina Braun. Bernie was church treasurer. After the church began paying a regular salary he was responsible for the details. There were John and Nettie Janzen, both Sunday School teachers and close personal friends. There was Isby Bergen who lived across the school yard from our house and could see our lights late at night. She could call us around midnight to share and talk about her interests in church and community. Before the establishment of Altona Mennonite Church I would spend many an hour in Ted Friesen's office discussing the various aspects of church work. He and Linie also were personal friends. There were D. K. and Mary Friesen. Although both were extremely busy people, they were always ready to promote church programs. D. K. and John Enns pushed very hard that the church pay a salary. There were so many special members and workers in the whole church that it is impossible to include them all. I will draw attention only to several next-door neighbours, Menno and Helen Braun and Ed and Susan Toews. It was comforting to have these people be so supportive.

Sometimes I wonder how I survived my heavy schedule. It was fortunate that I did not know about burnout. I did not know that a minister must have a day in the week for himself and his family. I did not know that ministers had regular holidays. In the early years I would frequently be involved in church meetings or pastoral visitation until midnight, then come home and work at preparing my classes for the next day at Elim. We relaxed at the annual conference sessions and the few days we added at the end. Gerald still teases me about an incident when I promised he could come along to conference if he completed a certain task. At the same time, I was not as alone as some pastors are today in that I could lean heavily on the ministerial body. Many times after a full evening of meetings we would relax and have coffee with two or three of those couples. Menno Brauns lived next to us; Ed Stoesz lived two houses away. It was easy to run over or have them come to our house at 10:00 or 10:30 P.M. for an hour of fellowship. Sometimes, when they would come to our house, one of our girls

would go and babysit their children for that time. Those were times of relaxation and laughter, times of fellowship when we experienced renewal and strength for the challenges that awaited us next morning.

During our 21 years in Altona our call to the church was repeated a number of times. I don't think the church voted on our coming there in the first place. That call was based on the invitation of the leaders. Later, when we operated under the guidelines of a constitution, the church always voted on one ballot. On the ballot were the names of David Schulz and myself. Members then could vote for both of us. The terms were normally for three years. During the earlier years he was leader and I was his assistant. Then it was changed so that I was the leader and he was the assistant. From about 1964 David F. Friesen was the assistant. We thought it would have been divisive if the congregation would have to choose between people.



Church work in a tightly knit community brought with it a variety of blessings. This included the dedication prayer at the opening of W.C. Miller Collegiate, a new Credit Union building and several expansions of D.W. Friesen Printers. Here I cut the ribbon at the dedication of the 1953 addition to Friesen's plant (from left): R.C. Friesen, Frank H. Epp, Ted E. Friesen, Mary Friesen Braun, Grace Heinrichs Krahn, Sarah (Mrs. D.H.) Reimer. Courtesy: Friesen Printers

The years in Altona were interrupted by a summer (1960) and nine months (1966-67) at our Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. The central Bergthaler Church provided some support for the year of study. During that time I was to do preliminary research on the story of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church. Although the church called us back for another three years, I felt the need for a change. I had served long enough and the people in Altona needed a change. Susan felt that her time of enjoyable church work was just at its peak. Although we did not accept invitations from other churches, a call from the head office of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada challenged me. I felt especially affirmed when Dr. Henry Poettcker and Dr. Waldemar Janzen, president and dean of Canadian Mennonite Bible College, made a trip to my Altona office in support of that invitation. Although our three-year term was not completed, we decided to terminate our stay in Altona. Susan found saying yes to the Winnipeg call extremely difficult. By then she had many very close friends and associates in Altona. Her work in the church was creative and fulfilling. Linda, who was finishing her eighth grade, also protested. For years she had envisioned her further education at W. C. Miller Collegiate in Altona.

Together with Susan I wrote the letter of resignation.* I submitted it to church council and they were left with no doubt that the letter was clear and final. When I walked back to our house that March evening it seemed as if I was floating on a cloud, as if I had been promoted. I felt exhilarated and rejuvenated. The call which had come 21 years earlier in that small suite on 16 Edmonton Street in Winnipeg had been wholly fulfilled. It had been challenging and we had enjoyed our work. Now that phase of our life was finished. I was a free man. At that time Susan could not fully appreciate my newly found excitement.

Altona, both the church and community, had been good to us. The school system had served our children well. Within the framework of a secular state-run school system, Christian teachers had influenced our children positively. We liked the community and had many friends beyond our church membership. Susan and I will never forget those late evening coffees and those prayer-filled supportive discussions. We owed much to the Altona people and still feel that same warmth whenever we meet them. At the same time, I felt that I no longer had the freshness in spirit and sermon resources that is so necessary to carry on as leading pastor. It was time to move on. We felt sorry to leave,

* A copy of the letter is included at the end of the chapter.

yet to this day we feel we did what was good for us and the church. Those 21 years had allowed us to experience healing from the Mexico defeat, raise our family, and be rejuvenated with new courage to face other chapters in our journey of faith. We trust that in those 21 years in the Altona church our ministry added to the spiritual journey of these people we had learned to love.

March 4, 1971

Rev. G. A. Neufeld
Chairman, Church Council
Altona Bergthaler Mennonite Church

Dear Brother Neufeld:

Every person needs to evaluate or take stock periodically to determine the direction he is going. During the past 10 or 12 years Susan and I have at times quite seriously faced the possibility of terminating our services with Altona Bergthaler Mennonite Church.

During our whole stay in Altona there have been calls from other churches and/or church- or conference-related work. We either felt we could not break away from our host of friends and close supporters or we felt we still had a contribution to make to the work here in Altona.

Today we feel led to inform the Church Council that we have accepted a call to the Conference of Mennonites in Canada to take on the position as Executive Secretary or Conference Minister.

Some of the reasons that have entered into our decision are: The work offers a challenge during a time that our conferences and institutions are in a flux of change. This call came to us in 1964 and in 1968. We believe with this call that with God's help we may be able to make a contribution.

We believe our work here in Altona needs to be terminated. For almost 21 years we have given our hearts and souls for this congregation. We have loved the church and its people. Today, however, we believe we owe it to the congregation to be free to determine its course for the future.

I am therefore informing you that we submit our resignation as leader of this congregation, effective July 31st.

This decision causes us and possibly others pain. This has been our home and here our children have grown up. We wish you God's blessing and trust you will continue to experience his loving presence.

Yours in His service,

Henry & Susan Gerbrandt

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The Central Bergthaler Church

The Mennonite immigrants of the 1870s were not accustomed to independent local church institutions as manifested in North America. For the first number of years all Mennonites living in Russia were part of the Mennonite church or community. That unity was gradually fragmented as first, the *Kleine Gemeinde* (EMC) separated from the larger body in 1812, then around 1860 the Mennonite Brethren Church was formed. Other divisions followed. But none of the groupings emphasized the local independent congregation. Usually a smaller or larger number of local congregations were united under the leadership of one *Ältester*.*

With that experience the Chortitza-Bergthaler migrants came to the east and west reserves of Manitoba. That was the understanding of Bishop Johann Funk when he led his reform movement in 1892-93. Although there were three or four worship centres, they were united under one bishop. There was no separate church register for Edenberg, Hochstadt or Hoffnungsfeld. None of the local centres had its own financial accounting. For example, a central church decision was necessary if a ton of coal was required for Hochstadt. Or, when the Winkler group wanted a hitching rail installed soon after the turn of the century, it had to consult the central ministerial body. There was only one authority: the bishop and his ministers.

* The best translation of the German title *Ältester* is not clear. Both "elder" and "bishop" are commonly used. I consistently use the term "bishop" for the German word.

With some minor modifications that was the structure which Bishop David Schulz accepted as the only way the church should operate. And, with some minor modifications, that is how the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba functioned in 1950 when Susan and I accepted a call to serve in Altona. Although we were called by leaders from within the Altona group, our call was for the central Bergthaler Church as well. That dimension proved to be a tremendous challenge and during the next 21 years much of my time and energy was used to serve that larger church. At one time that central church included 20 local congregations with more than 3,000 members.

A number of functions had already changed when we came on the scene. Local congregations were in charge of catechism instruction classes. They also were on their own during the six or seven winter and spring months when one could not count on the condition of the rural roads. In summer we ministers followed a centrally prepared preaching schedule. That meant driving to various congregations for the Sunday morning service to places like MacGregor, Gladstone and Arden, a 150- to 200-mile trip from Altona. Sometimes those assignments tested our determination and goodwill. I recall travelling to Arden early one Sunday morning. When I came to the church there wasn't a soul in sight. I waited a while, then drove to the yard of a family which was usually in church. I asked what had happened. They told me there was a skunk under the front porch and they had thought it best to cancel the service. They had called everyone except the minister who had to drive 200 miles. It seemed they even expected me to catch the skunk. I drove back to Altona instead.

For many years I was in charge of preparing the central preaching schedule. What a challenge! But it brought me many fruitful experiences. The itineration was a strange test for us ministers. We could simply prepare one sermon and preach it all summer, or we could prepare sermons based on what we thought each local congregation needed. I found it necessary to prepare a different sermon for Winkler than for Arden. The needs were simply too different.

However, that practice was not followed by all. A certain minister preached a rousing and exuberant thanksgiving sermon in an area where the people had enjoyed a bountiful harvest. The following Sunday he preached the same sermon in a church where hail had destroyed the total crop. Some people responded, "The sermon just didn't speak to us." Not surprisingly, most ministers had some pet themes. One man loved to preach on Revelation 20. At least that way

many more people got to hear a sermon about the second coming of Christ.

Another dimension of those itineration experiences was the attendance. The service itinerary was always published in the *Bergthaler Gemeindeblatt*. That permitted everyone to know who would be preaching. Naturally, some ministers were more attractive than others, resulting in great fluctuation in attendance. I recall talking to a woman who complained that Rev. X was very dull. She could not understand his rambling sermons. I suggested that she should pray all week for him before he came. The next time we met she confessed that Rev. X had improved a great deal and she had been blessed by his sermon.

A worthwhile program which the central church provided for the local congregations was an annual evangelism week. It also proved to be one of the significant contributions which the Bergthaler Mennonite Church made to Mennonite church life and spirituality. That week-long evangelistic ministry, usually held in winter, had really begun in 1892 at the time of the new reforms. Because of poor roads in rural areas, those services were conducted not only in church buildings but also in many regional school buildings. Many Sommerfelder, Old Colony and Mennonite Brethren attended as well. They were real community events.

For the evangelism services two ministers or deacons were assigned to one place. Usually both would preach a simple sermon on the parables or some other teaching of Jesus. The sermons were called evangelistic but really were more like deeper life presentations. Although there were no altar calls, people made commitments to Christ, discipleship and service. During the day the guest ministers would visit the homes of people who needed help. The experience was usually quite wholesome for the entire community.

A number of the Bergthaler ministers had very little schooling and no systematic Bible training. Some of them felt rather intimidated by large congregations like Altona, Morden, Winkler or the MCI in Gretna. They maintained there was too much education in those congregations. One year two such ministers came to Altona for the evangelism week. They were sincere but somehow people did not respond to them. They had great difficulty kindling any interest and people just would not come to hear them.

One cold evening, after only a small number of people had been present for the service, Mrs. Schulz waited until our brave ministers had gone to their host's homes and then dryly commented, "Na jo, wan

wie wiere tüss jebewe onn haude jemond besocht, wud wie en jratra Säajen jehaut han” (If we would have stayed home and visited someone we would have received a greater blessing). Only Mrs. Schulz had the stature and liberty to say that. The rest wholeheartedly agreed with her.

The most important body for the Bergthaler church was the *Lehrdienst* (Ministerial). Mennonites had brought along that form of leadership from Russia. It consisted of the bishop, who clearly was in charge of that body, and all ministers and deacons of the church. When I arrived the Bergthaler Church consisted of 20 local congregations with a Ministerial of up to 100 men. Until the early 1930s that was the only organized body for running the church. Then, with the breakdown of the *Waisenamt*, the lay people of the church demanded that business matters be taken from the Ministerial and given to a separate business committee.

The central Ministerial could meet monthly to consider any issues that affected local congregations. At the meetings we would study how to conduct annual catechism or membership classes. Discipline problems and church regulations were handled within the Ministerial. We would also work at important theological issues. One minister would read a prepared paper to be discussed by all. When the divorce issue became serious we discussed a paper on, “Do we have a ministry to the divorced and remarried?” During my time we had study papers on issues like visitation, child dedication, membership lists and problems related to inactive members.

The central church had two very important annual sessions called *Bruderschaft* (Brotherhood meetings). They were called “brotherhood” because only the men, no women, were voting members. The meetings were held in two sections. One session, under the leadership of the church *Haushaltskomitee* (Business Committee), dealt with the business dimension of the church.

During the era of extensive church construction after World War II, that section of the Brotherhood voted on hundreds of thousands of dollars to finance new church buildings for most congregations. That was no small undertaking. The central church provided one-third to one-half for a new church. Large congregations like Altona and Winkler received less for their expensive structures. The *Haushaltskomitee* also was responsible for the financial support of the bishop and travel costs for ministerial meetings, not paid as mileage but as a flat sum annually. The highest amount ever paid in a year was \$200.

The Committee also had to devise means to collect the funds. At one time, during the early 1950s, they published the names of all central church members and the amounts of money each donated to the church. Naturally many people had not paid their basic levy. The following business Brotherhood turned out to be rather heated. Some respected members who had held good positions in the church were exposed as having paid nothing at all. The following year most of the church levies were fully paid up.

The second meeting was the *Innere Bruderschaft* (the inner or spiritual Brotherhood). That meeting dealt with the so-called spiritual dimension of the church. Church discipline, methods of catechism instruction, wedding issues and preaching schedules were deliberated. During my earlier years church discipline was a central church issue. Usually discipline problems were first shared at the ministerial meetings. Those issues which could not be resolved there were brought to the Brotherhood meeting for a decisive action. Disobedient members could even be excommunicated, although gradually that practice ceased.

Weddings were a local issue but, for the sake of uniformity, wedding guidelines were discussed and agreed upon at the central level. For several years I served on the committee responsible for formulating those guidelines. Regulations also were needed to keep itinerant, independent, free-lance ministers from conducting their abbreviated weddings and to keep the weddings on a high spiritual level. The guidelines were in use for only a few years yet set the course of weddings in a positive direction.

During my earlier years the central ministerial body made the decision to elect new ministers. Although the elections themselves normally would be handled by the local congregation, the central church considered it appropriate that it also become involved. Complications could result. On one occasion, when a local congregation decided to hold an election for two ministers, the central Ministerial thought they needed help and asked members from other congregations to participate in the balloting. Later some members in the congregation complained that their ministers had been forced on them by being elected from the outside. They implied that the outsiders voted for people they did not want.

Another function of the central body was to keep the so-called progressive or radical churches in line. Increased use of the English language in worship always created a problem. It pressed in, at times

mercilessly, from many directions. It was not uncommon for Bishop Schulz to request authority from the central church to go to a local congregation to pull in the reins on English programs. That problem was more acute for groups like Lowe Farm, Kane and Morris on the edge of the reserve areas. The people of southern Manitoba simply did not understand the pressures which those congregations faced. Church members who had settled in those areas before the turn of the century seemed to breathe a freer air than those of the former reserve regions. Their children and grandchildren accepted an English lifestyle much earlier than their cousins further south.

The central church also was responsible for constitutional issues. In fact, constitutional questions had been on the agenda for decades and became crucial concerns during the 1950s. From the days of its beginnings in Holland, Prussia and Russia, the uncompromised tradition had been that the bishop of the central church would conduct all local meetings. That was what all groups were used to when they came to Manitoba during the 1870s and for large numbers of migrants that came during the 1920s.

The first signs of trouble on that issue surfaced in Morden in the early 1950s. Rev. J. M. Pauls,* together with a deacon, Johann Wiens, decided to conduct their own membership meetings. That decision apparently was not shared with Bishop Schulz but only reported to him after the meeting had been held. About the same time Rev. Peter P. Heinrichs and his son-in-law, George Groening, reported that they too had conducted a membership meeting in Lowe Farm. It was obvious that the central bishop's control was beginning to be challenged.

Thinking that I might be a mediator and help Brother Schulz weather the upheaval, I outlined a possible constitutional direction that might give more autonomy to the local congregation, yet recognize the central leadership. In a letter to Schulz I suggested that he propose the calling and authorization of a leader in each one of our 19 or 20 local congregations. Those local leaders might then be ordained and be considered *Unter-Älteste* (literally, under-bishops). Schulz would remain the *Ober-Ältester* (over- or leading bishop) and as such would

* J. M. Pauls, an immigrant of the 1920s, was called to ministerial leadership in Morden in 1933. Pauls was a man of vision, leadership, ability and boundless energy. He was a powerful preacher. His sermons on the family were widely acclaimed. The Morden church facilities had to be enlarged to provide space for all the people who wanted to listen to his messages at the local *Jugendverein*. When Pauls was called as assistant bishop to Schulz in 1951, he made the move to Winkler.

coordinate the work of the local assistants. He would retain leadership of the central church and lead all meetings which affected the total body.

I certainly had not intended to begin a revolution. Rather, I thought I had offered a positive solution and felt good about that. But my intentions were not understood. I received another one of those unpleasant phone calls from Bishop Schulz. I was told that I had no business doing planning for the central church. I had not been appointed to develop designs for the central Bergthaler Church. I warned him that a revolution was coming and that, if the issue was dealt with in time, it might be nipped in the bud. Then he would remain in control and might carry on indefinitely. But Schulz simply could not accept or understand my thinking.

The constitutional debate continued for 15 more years. I was not the main spokesman. Until his death in 1961 J. M. Pauls was a key player in the debate and planning. Other significant people in the discussion were D. D. Klassen, Homewood; J. F. Pauls, Morden; Ernest Wiebe, Winnipeg; Frank H. Epp, Altona; Ted Friesen, Altona; Henry F. Wiebe, Winkler; and many others. After one of those long constitutional discussions, Schulz and I were in the same car going back to Altona. He confessed, "This has been the darkest day of my life." I felt so sorry for him. Rightly he saw that, not only was his conception of what the church should be collapsing, but also a Mennonite tradition that had given strength to its bishops through centuries was breaking down. At that time I wished I could have ended the constitutional talks and turned back the clock.

The ruthless winds of reform were blowing not only in the Bergthaler Church. The winds of change were being felt across Canada. In 1962 at the annual sessions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in St. Catharines, Ontario, H. T. Klaassen of Eigenheim, Saskatchewan, presented a paper entitled, "Our Bishops." It was devastating for the bishops. It seemed there was no longer any help nor sympathy for that besieged group. No one could stop the change that was unfolding. A rich era was coming to a catastrophic end.

To this day I wish that bishops like David Schulz, Wilhelm Enns, Paul Schaefer and many others could have been more open to dialogue. Maybe the reaction could have been less radical. Perhaps the transition to a new leadership polity which was more in keeping with our Anabaptist tradition might have been found. To this day no satisfactory evaluation has been done on the advantages and disadvantages of the

transition from the earlier system of bishops to our present pattern of career pastor and church council leadership. Bishop Schulz fought valiantly to save the system and consented to the election of more bishops* to the central church. But the reform movement could not be halted.

One of the last major issues discussed by the central church was the question of joining the General Conference Mennonite Church. For generations there had been pressure to join. Finally, in 1968 a favourable decision was made when the old powerful central church no longer stood in the way. A watered-down resolution was presented to the Brotherhood. It recommended that each local congregation be given the freedom to join or not join the General Conference. The motion passed with a large majority. That was an historic moment, the end of an era. Authority had passed from the central church to the local congregation without major discussion.

The central church then began to blunder to its next, its last inevitable major decision: a vote concerning its very existence. That came a few years later. I was glad that illness kept Bishop Schulz from that and subsequent Brotherhood meetings. The pain of hearing those discussions and seeing how eager some delegates were to do away with the past would have been unbearable for him.

Although initially I had been part of the reform movement, I now voted against dissolution. I felt there was too much unfinished business (for example, the church owned hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of property) to vote itself out of existence. Secondly, my vote was a sympathy vote for my long-time coworker and mentor David Schulz. A new era had come. Only the future would tell whether the new would be good.

The final festivity of the central church was a thanksgiving service for the many years in which the unified Bergthaler Church had functioned. For many faithful, elderly members, who had not been involved with church structure and leadership, this was more like a funeral service. There was both weeping and rejoicing. In my presentation at that celebration I invited the people to look forward with the following words:

* It seemed impossible to pacify the reform pressures. Even with two travelling bishops, Schulz and Pauls, the demand for more local involvement continued. In 1961 three more men—Ernest Wiebe, Winnipeg, J. F. Pauls, Morden, and David D. Klassen, Homewood—were elected and ordained as assistant bishops.

For me personally, this Church has played an important role. To a very large degree the Bergthaler Church has been the world in which I have made my spiritual journey.

Time moves, and we have become a moving people. Together with our children we must embrace, first of all, the Manitoba, Canadian and General Conferences; then we need to establish fellowship with other Mennonite and non-Mennonite churches.

Our grandparents were faced with breaking the virgin prairies. They planted a Church here. We are facing a more hostile and dangerous frontier: the secular, materialistic, technological world with its teeming millions. It is a world of cynicism, bloodshed, drugs, abortion, pollution, racial hatred, social apathy and spiritual indifference.

Today we dare not weep for a return to the open spaces and simple protected life. We close this farewell service with a commitment to move forward. We join hands and encourage each other to meet with confidence the demands of the future. The promise of Christ, "I am with you, even to the end of the age," is our promise for the task now before us.

At least one of the commitments made by Manitoba Conference officials at that time never worked out as projected. Conference leaders had promised to help the Bergthaler ministers and deacons by carrying on with their meetings. That fizzled out after a meeting or two.

By that time I had accepted work with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and had also transferred my membership to the Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. Many of our Bergthaler ministers and deacons missed their former fellowship and mutual support. They had been orphaned.

I appreciated working with that central church for 21 years. I did not always agree with the direction it took. On some issues we younger ministers vigorously defended another option. One example of this involved a church member who had married a divorced woman. Both were now confessing Christians. The decision was that they could not be members of the church because their wrongdoing was ongoing. However, they were given permission to work in the church and even come to communion. Our argument against that decision was that this made our local church more holy than God's church.

The central church concept helped the Bergthaler Mennonite Church expand to 20 congregations with more than 3,000 members

* Henry J. Gerbrandt, *Postscript to Adventure in Faith* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMBC Publications, 1986), 23-24.

and provided good worship facilities for them all. It had a large team of ministers and deacons working together, serving the weak rural congregations as well as the large congregations in towns. It held the church together for more than three-quarters of a century. It had been one of the founding churches of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in 1902-1903 and a leader in the development of the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba. I am happy to have been an active participant and its secretary for many years.

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Susan and Family

In 1950 no Mennonite congregation would have considered extending an official call to ministry to a husband-and-wife team. The man was called and the woman was expected to be his supportive wife. And if any local congregation in the Bergthaler setting might have been ready to call a pastoral husband-wife team, it probably would not have been Altona. Although liberal in some ways, it was also very conservative regarding traditional matters like the calling of ministers. At the same time, though not officially called that way nor identified as such, Susan and I constituted such a team, especially as our ministry developed during our later years.

We came to Altona with two children, Gerald and Elaine, both born in Mexico: Gerald on July 11, 1946, and Elaine on February 27, 1948. Our two other children were born in Altona: Norma on October 24, 1951, and Linda on February 20, 1957. When the latter girls joined our family we still lived in the small house in the southeast part of town. Our income was very limited. We had to supplement the five months of salary from Elim with extra employment. For some years I had a six-week assignment with the Manitoba Conference placing Summer Bible School teachers. Several years both Susan and I worked at Assiniboine Mennonite Mission Camp (now Camp Assiniboia). In spring we both thinned and weeded beets; in fall we helped with harvesting beets. Whenever I had time I spent hours with the D. W. Friesen firm doing proofreading and translation work. In the summer of 1954 I spent six weeks in Scottdale, Pennsylvania, helping outline biblical materials for a new series of Sunday School lessons.

During such times Susan kept the home together. Those first years

in Altona were extremely difficult for her. Because she had to care for the children, she felt more keenly than I that our income was low. We did not seem to fit into the new thriving world to which we had come. For Susan integrating into Altona felt ominous.

In 1957 we built our new house on Third Street N.W., just south of the Altona High School (now Westpark School). Fortunately, our small house and yard had appreciated in value much more than inflation. We had landscaped the yard beautifully with trees and shrubs and the garden plot was very fertile. We also had redecorated the 20-foot by 20-foot house to make it appear larger than it actually was. Although in total we had spent less than \$1,500 on it, we sold it for \$3,000 cash.

Nevertheless, the new house was far beyond our financial means. We had to borrow another \$3,000 from the Altona Credit Union—and that when the original loan for the first house was still largely unpaid. The new loan marked a major change for us. It was the beginning of our integration into Altona society with its socialist-capitalist tensions.

I first went to the Bank of Commerce and shared our house dreams with the manager. With great professional pomp he drew out his huge ledger and began to ask me for a detailed listing of all our assets. When he discovered that we still owed at least \$1,000 on the small house, that our furniture consisted of little more than orange crates and discarded beds and tables, that we had no savings in the bank and only a five-month limited salary, he was flabbergasted. He was helpless. Rather deliberately he returned his ledger to the shelf, put down his pen and informed me that no banker could risk money on us. I must have looked quite dejected. Half jokingly he added, “Maybe the Credit Union would be foolish enough to risk it.” I thanked him and scampered across the street to the Credit Union.

Entering that building gave me a very strange feeling. Had not my good brother-in-law, who had helped us with the first parcel of land, repeatedly told me that the Rhineland Coop and Credit Union were communist cells in Altona? He never went there and had discouraged me from entering that “red” stronghold, except when he wanted me to cash those unfortunate cheques which Co-op members had given him when buying coal in his business.

The manager of the Credit Union was Art Braun, a friend of mine from Grade 9 in the Altona High School. Art took down my application. He knew I had no assets. He told me to come back in a week after the Loans Credit Committee had had its meeting. When I came back

Art cheerfully informed me that our loan had been approved. Incidentally, that loan was finally paid off in 1971 when we left Altona. For a full 16 years we made our regular payments. During that time we bought several cars, finished our house and added that to our loan. We consolidated our private loans, including the one we had made to buy the first house, and added everything to our Credit Union account. We even borrowed \$2,000 and used it as a life insurance policy. The Credit Union had a policy that debts up to \$2,000 were cancelled in case of a death.

After 1965 our financial situation had improved. By that time I was on full salary. However, even earlier—in fact, since our marriage—we had given our tithes and offerings to our church and Conferences. Granted, there were times when credits from the Credit Union had to be used to tide us over during some difficult months.

The move to our new house did much to integrate us more into the church community. We were close to the church and Susan more easily could become part of ongoing activities there. In time she became involved in several very important phases of church work. She joined the Mary Martha Women's group. Before long she was elected president and served a number of terms. That women's work brought her into many relationships that became very creative. Deacon David B. Friesen discovered in Susan a reliable associate to relate to broken families and new immigrants. The committee in which both deacons' and women's groups worked was the *Wohltätigkeitskomitee* (Good Deeds Committee). That committee gave Susan various responsibilities in putting shipwrecked lives back together again.

An important contribution she made to the church was her work in developing a Cradle Roll program. Often Susan and I had talked about the needs of women and their new babies. She visited churches where some kind of Cradle Roll work was in operation. She wrote to Sunday School superintendents in different churches for information and to Mennonite Publishing House in Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, for suitable materials. After everything was put together she had a very interesting program to present to the church.

We had an official launching service where the whole program was outlined to the membership. She served approximately eight years as chairperson of the Cradle Roll Committee. She organized a group of 16 visiting mothers. The goal was to be in touch with all expectant mothers and be ready for contacts while the mother and baby were still in the hospital. Once the mother and baby were home they were visited



Susan with Anna Dyck teaching a Daily Vacation Bible School class in the early 1950s.

regularly for two years with suitable material left for the parents. After the second year the church gave the graduating mother and child a one-year subscription to *Christian Living*, a family magazine published by the Mennonite Church. Every year we had a graduation service for the two-year-olds which involved the whole church. After that the mother was invited to enrol the child in the nursery class in Sunday School. Annually a supper or coffee hour was sponsored to which, at first only mothers, later both parents were invited. A speaker would address issues related to raising children or the importance of Christian nurture in the home. At one point we had more than 80 children registered in the program.

The Cradle Roll ministry did not focus only on our church members. Like other large congregations, we also had a considerable number of non-members attending. They were all included in Cradle Roll. Like all communities, Altona also had a sizable group of unattached, unchurched families. They were contacted and several were won for

the church and the Lord through that program. The Cradle Roll ministry did much in our congregation to focus on family life, child training and discipleship. It was an important component of our church life and outreach ministry.

Another important dimension of our ministry together was visitation. With few exceptions, Susan and I made most of our visits together. That was true especially in calling on the sick, the dying and the bereaved. Very often Susan had to leave her cooking, sewing or ordinary household work at a moment's notice and join me to call on a bereaved home. That was also true when we visited homes with newborn babies. She had the knack of gaining entry into people's needs more quickly than I. Unfortunately, the Berghaler Church in Altona was so large that this task was always unfinished.

It was impossible to project a visit to all church members on a regular basis. And it was totally out of the question for us during the years when I also served full-time at Bible school. We worked with the traditional *Lehrdienst* in which all the ministers and deacons were



Susan with the Altona Mary Martha Women's group in the late 1950s (front row, from left): Lena Loewen, Tien Sawatsky, Tien Funk, Susan Gerbrandt, Anne Loewen, Mary Dyck.; (middle row): Tina Teichroeb, Mary Friesen, Nettie Janzen, Mary Heinrichs, Neta Friesen, Justina Braun; (back row): Margaret Friesen, Tien Loewen, Anne Stobbe, Sara Reimer, Emma Loewen, Justina Peters, Isby Bergen.

committed to visitation work. Susan and I visited the sick, the bereaved, families with special problem, seniors and others. The weakness of that approach was that we still missed many homes.

A major task that fell on Susan's shoulders was typing for me. During most of our years in Altona the church provided virtually no secretarial help for its ministers. At some points women like Verna Sawatzky, Anne Neufeld, Irene Artez and Mary Anne Kehler were hired to do some typing for the church and, for about a year, I shared a secretary with our radio ministry. But throughout much of the time Susan did most of my typing. She has typed countless letters and Sunday morning bulletins. Our children have folded thousands of bulletins. After Susan took a typing course in 1965, she typed all my letters and most minutes. That proved invaluable for the church and some of the committees on which I served. Although the voluntary service (VS) concept was not as commonly recognized as it is today, all her work was done voluntarily without remuneration. It was simply considered to be part of our team effort in church ministry.

Having Susan do so much typing had a distinct advantage for me. Frequently she would critique my sermons and letters. That caused me to review and modify what I had intended to say or write. Her biggest typing challenge came when I worked on the book, *Adventure in Faith*, my history of the Bergthaler Church. She actually typed those 372 pages three and four times before the copy was ready for the printers. That mammoth work was done mostly gratis. The Lord has rewarded her and us richly. But sometimes I wonder whether the church society realized that they also owed her something.

We have often shared with our children that we wanted to be able to spend a little more freely on them as they grew up. For many years the only holiday they had was the time they spent at Mennonite conference sessions. In 1962 they endured three conferences end to end: first, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada sessions in St. Catharines, Ontario; then the Mennonite World Conference in Kitchener, Ontario; and finally the General Conference Mennonite Church sessions in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. That was a long time to thrive on bread and bologna. Our neighbour lady in Altona, Selma Loewen, gave us \$10 just before we left home and said we should have one restaurant meal on her. We did that in Washington, D.C. on our way back from the conferences. Since there was no money left for motels, we drove home from Washington without stopping for night. The blessing is that the children have not been turned away from public

Christian service but are carrying on faithfully with that tradition. Our grandchildren are enduring the same busy homes, the same pressures of church and Christian service work. We trust they will inherit the same lifestyle and dedication.

Our financial situation also affected the way we treated our children with regard to their education after high school. Several years ago one of Susan's nephews attended university. It cost the family about \$3,000. They then added up our four children's many years of education above high school and multiplied that by \$3,000. It came to an enormous sum of money. "Where did we get all that money?" they asked. "You must have been on a very high salary." We informed them that our four children had worked their way through their various schools. They received some scholarships or grants, but mostly they borrowed money. Before student loan money was available we had to co-sign notes at the Altona Credit Union. But they never defaulted and, to our knowledge, all loans have been repaid.

Before the children left home to continue their education, we did little travelling beyond our annual conferences sessions—except one memorable trip to Mexico in the summer of 1963. Naturally, Susan and I had talked a lot about our Mexico experience. By mutual agreement we decided to try to retrace our steps and show our family where Gerald and Elaine had been born and spent their early childhood. Months before the trip we set the date for our departure. I kept two weeks free on my calendar. Then our neighbour's daughter, a member of our church, decided our departure date was to be the precise day for her wedding. We couldn't say no to Esther Loewen nor could we easily break our travelling schedule.

When Esther's evening wedding finished at about nine, our children were waiting. Susan had sewn new travelling outfits for the three girls. The car was packed and the children were dressed for travelling before Susan left for the church. When we got back our poor girls were almost worn out from not playing, not doing anything that would soil or crumple their neatly ironed pleats. To make up for lost time, we drove through the night. Gerald and I changed off driving. It was a beautiful family experience, driving through a very dark and rainy night, not only sitting close together but also feeling bonded to each other.

By morning we were driving through the beautiful agricultural regions of Nebraska. We saw and smelled the huge cattle feeding lots. Thousands of feeders were cramped into dirty enclosures. We felt sorry for the poor animals. Compared to my own farming experience,

where only a few cows were kept in spacious pastures or barn stalls, that method of raising animals seemed very cruel. In Oklahoma we stopped at Emil Schmidts, former MPM workers at Matheson Island. We worshipped with them in the Corn (Oklahoma) Mennonite Brethren Church and were invited for the noon meal. We marvelled at the red soil and the cotton fields. Not only we but also our car suffered from the extreme mid-west August heat. It continually overheated.

In Oklahoma we also ran into such an intense dust storm that we were forced to pull off the road. We couldn't see cars 20 feet away. Naturally we thought of all the stories about tornadoes picking up cars and smashing them into smithereens. Suddenly the storm turned into a cloudburst which brought the soil back to earth again. By evening we were in Texas. We had planned to spend the night in a small tent borrowed from Jake and Jean Friesen. But the sky looked too foreboding. And the dust storm and unusual downpour were still too fresh in our minds. Instead we checked into a motel in Lubbock, Texas, a new experience for us. We could not afford the luxury of getting our breakfast in a restaurant. Our meals consisted of bread, jam and bologna eaten in a motel room.

Crossing into Mexico was uneventful compared to our experiences during the 1940s when we tried to get our entry visas. However, the delay was long enough. We still remembered some Spanish but that was in no way helpful. Our attempts at speaking only reminded the immigration officers of the many Mennonites who always tried to find new ways of crossing the border. We decided to take a motel in Ciudad Juarez right across the border. Once inside we discovered that our room was infested with cockroaches. They were so huge that even a bragging Texan might have found his match. Perhaps they even came from there! In an instant our women folk had deposited their feet on the bed. When Gerald and I finished our hunting expedition, not a roach dared show its head.

The other eventful experience in that motel was eating a Mexican hot dog. Truly that food was properly named *un perro caliente* (a dog hot). By the time we were ready to vacate our adobe castle next morning, Susan had done a thorough house cleaning job, preparing it for its next fastidious guests.

An important stop on our way to the mountains was the Palmore Hospital in Chihuahua City. Gerald and Elaine wanted to see the place where they had been born. Susan and I were more surprised than they. We remembered it as a rather large, nice building. Now it seemed so

small and old. However, the outside surroundings were still beautiful. Another stopover was the Mennonite Centre in Cuauhtemoc. Briefly we met several of the Mennonites who had been so good to us when we first arrived 18 years earlier.

The trip to the mountains where we spent three years was made by train. Susan and I were disappointed that the old wood-burning locomotive and ancient, wood-heated cars had been replaced by a diesel locomotive and somewhat more modern coaches. Instead of crawling along slowly up into the mountains for eight to twelve hours, we covered the 175 kilometres in a few hours. In our Gachasouchi Valley we found the adobe house we had built in our first year in Mexico. It had been renovated, parts broken down and parts added. Our famous sweet-water well was still intact. It appeared as if one of the extra buildings had been converted into a classroom. A man we had known earlier claimed he had taught school in winter. We were fortunate to meet a few of our Indian friends on the ranch and several of our friends were still in Creel. Our greatest thrill came when we showed the children some of the trails we had walked with them when they were small, either to the town of Creel or to Indian huts. The Indian dwellings were as primitive as they had been 18 years earlier.

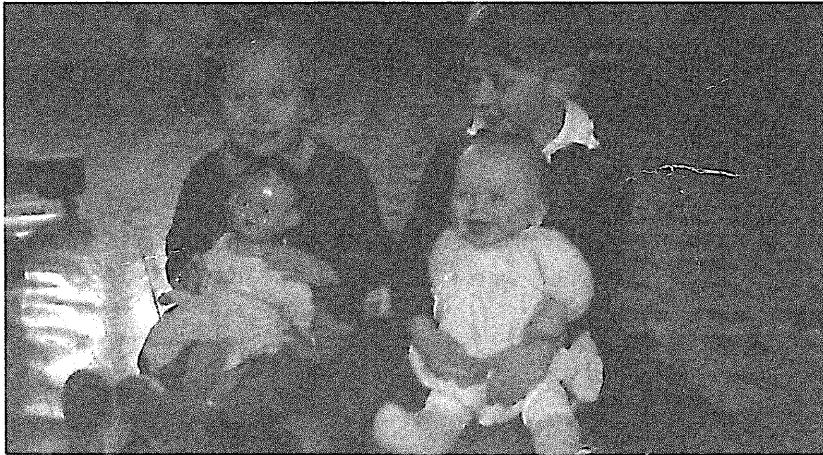
We rented a truck and driver to take us to Samachique, about 100 kilometres away, to the home of Kenneth and Martha Hilton and the headquarters of the Wycliffe work where we had spent our second last winter in Mexico proofreading his translations. It was nostalgic for us to live through some of the joys and disappointments of our short mission venture. And yet the question remains with us: could we have done things differently?

For the night we rented rooms in the same hotel where we had stayed years earlier when we had to take the early morning train. The hotel had been renovated and even had a nicely painted washroom (biffy) on the yard. It had two doors and the words *Ella* (hers) and *Ello* (his) painted on the doors. However, even though there were two holes in the biffy bench, there was no partition on the inside. A huge strutting turkey gobbler paraded back and forth in front of the doors, seeing to it that all decor for proper behaviour would be observed by those entering that new facility.

Years later Susan and I went back once more. We found that all traces of our mission compound had been erased. In its place stood a well-built brick school complex. We discovered it was Catholic. The people were all strangers. We met none of our former friends or



Above, our first child Gerald in 1946. Right, Norma and Linda 1960. Below, Elaine, Gerald, Norma 1954.



Our family—Susan, Elaine, Gerald, Norma and I—in 1956



At our 25th wedding anniversary in 1969 with Norma, Gerald, Elaine and Linda.



Triple 25th wedding anniversary in 1969: Henry and Susan Gerbrandt, Frank and Tina Groening, George and Nettie Groening



Our family in 1970 before the children married: Gerald, Elaine, Norma, Linda.

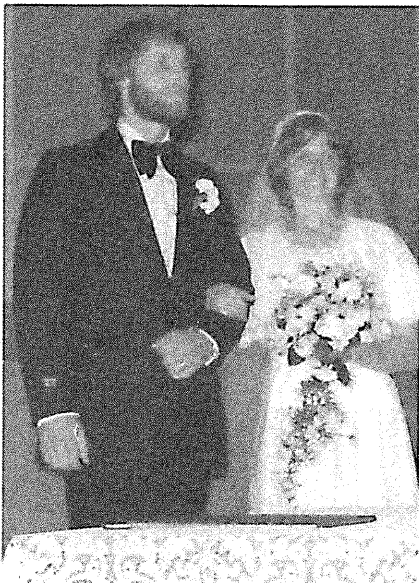


Our family is growing: Susan and I with Esther (Neudorf) and Gerald, Linda, Elaine and Abe Bergen, John Thiessen and Norma.



Above: Several guests in our backyard at our 35th wedding anniversary in 1979 (from left): Mary Braun, Anna Siemens, sister Mary Heinrichs, I, Susan, sister Helena Dueck. At right: I lean on a special home-made, engraved and initialled walking cane which I received from long-time friend Peter Braun at our 35th wedding anniversary.



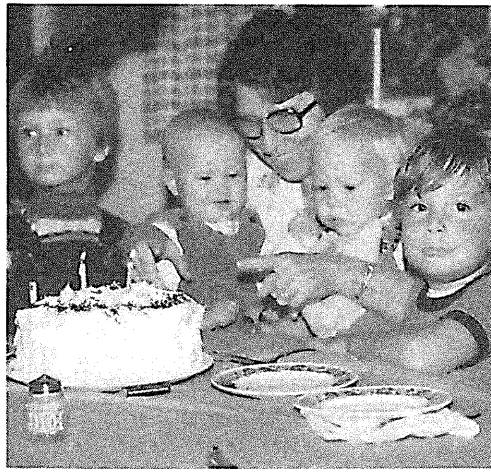


The weddings of our children (top left): Gerald with Esther Neudorf in 1971; (above): Elaine with Abe Bergen in 1971; (left): Linda with Eckhart Claassen in 1977; (below) Norma with John Thiessen in 1972 with parents, Susan and I, Natalie and John Thiessen.





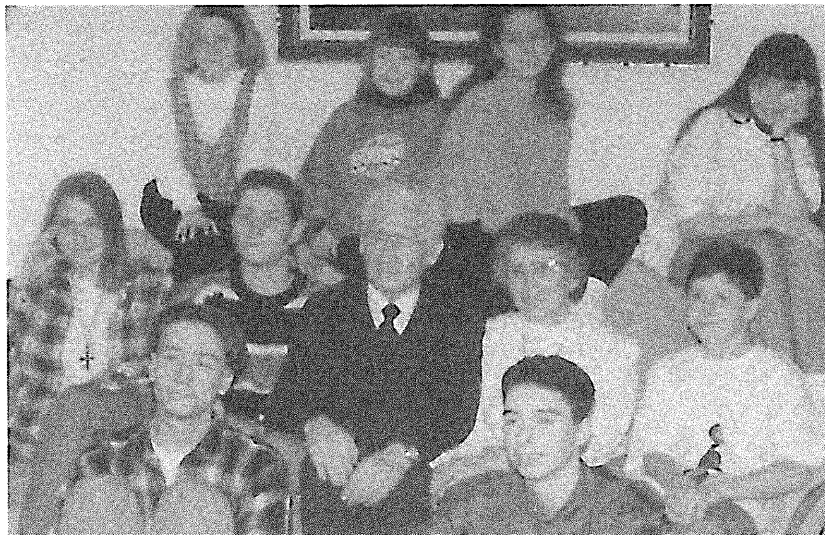
Jeremy Bergen, our first grandchild, born in 1975.



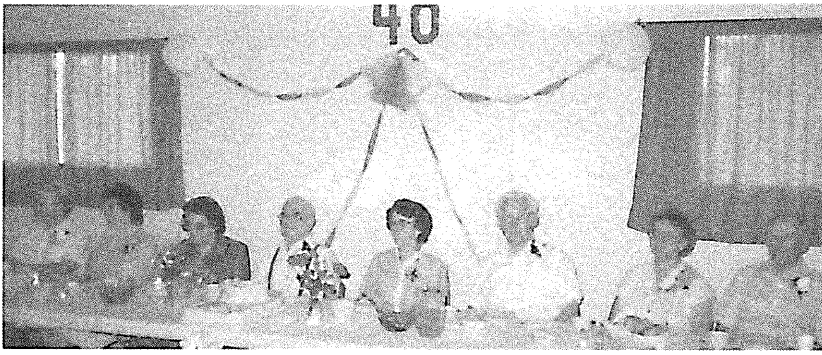
Birthdays are important celebrations which now happen 19 times a year in our family.



Our grandchildren in 1981.



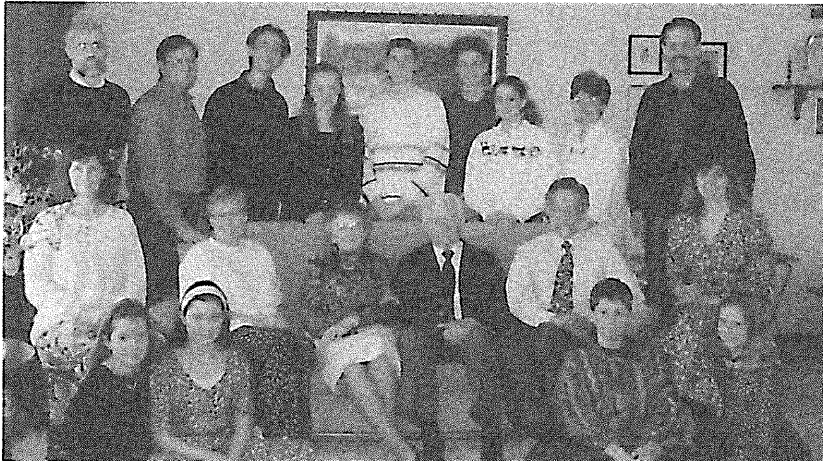
Grandparents with grandchildren in 1992 (back row, from left): Vanessa Claassen, Julia Thiessen, Virginia Gerbrandt, Laura Thiessen; (middle row): Rachel Bergen, Bradley Gerbrandt, Grandpa and Grandma, Jonathan Claassen; (front row): Jeremy Bergen, Nathan Gerbrandt



Fortieth wedding anniversaries (from left): George and Nettie Groening, Tina and Frank Groening, Susan and I in August 1984; Margaret and Eddie Groening in June 1984.



Our family in 1986.



Easter 1994 (back row, from left): John Thiessen, Abe Bergen, Jeremy Bergen, Rachel Bergen, Nathan Gerbrandt, Bradley Gerbrandt, Virginia Gerbrandt, Esther Gerbrandt, Eckhard Claassen; (middle row): Norma Thiessen, Elaine Bergen, Susan and I, Gerald Gerbrandt, Linda Claassen; (front row): Julia Thiessen, Laura Thiessen, Jonathan Claassen, Vanessa Claassen.



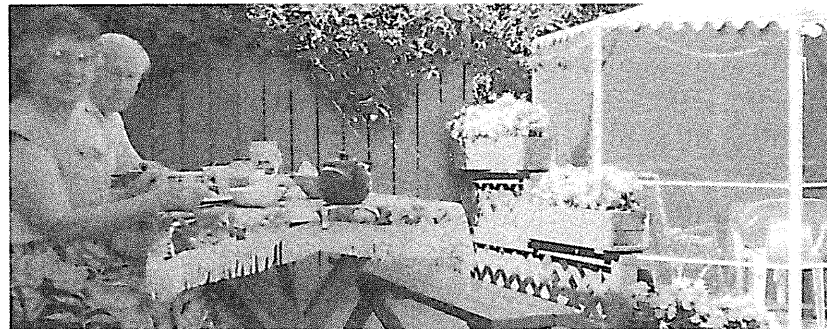
Our family on a picnic in a park at Portage la Prairie.



The family gathers for Sunday lunch.



Enjoying watermelon and Rollkuchen with Elaine and Gerald's families.



Supper outside on the deck.

acquaintances. We decided to accept the change. The children looked healthy and clean and had the general appearance of being looked after. We simply don't know how the complex came into the hands of the Catholic mission.

Susan and I believe in prayer. Daily we lift up our children and grandchildren to the Lord and pray for their well-being. We pray that their lives might be filled with the fullness of God. We know that the world they face is more difficult and complicated than the one our parents and we faced. Therefore, we do not give much advice about their domestic activities nor do we try to influence the grandchildren in vocational choices. We do pray that they might all know the Lord in his love and grace and that they might all find their fulfilment in personal and vocational pursuits. We have deposited a small amount of money for each grandchild and are suggesting that they spend some time in a Christian college or institution. Although we would prefer that to be a Mennonite institution, we are not binding them to any specific school.

Like many other homes, ours too had its tensions. Our children, especially Gerald and Elaine, will remember that Susan and I did not always agree in our approach to discipline and they witnessed some serious arguments. As I look at those tensions now it seems we projected a certain lostness regarding our own freedom. Although I never saw myself as being a chauvinist in the literal sense of the word, I still was a product of a mentality where a man's commitment to the church, the Bible school and the conferences demanded his total time, energy and thought pattern. I did not realize then that Susan too had committed herself to those same goals. It really struck me later when I heard her describe her commitment to the Lord, how she had to be satisfied to serve the Lord vicariously through me.

When we left Altona in 1971 to allow me to take up my work with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, her opportunity to serve the Lord by proxy through me was abruptly cut off. She was thrown into a crisis that opened up a whole new avenue of her being. She was now on her own. For six weeks she did secretarial work on a voluntary basis for Westgate Mennonite Collegiate. That gave her temporary security. Then, in a rather interesting way, she got a job with Winnipeg Family Services. Quickly she received several promotions and moved up to some sensitive positions. She took courses at the University of Winnipeg and Red River Community College. Those courses, together with her earlier experience in church work, allowed Family Services

to give her Bachelor of Arts salary level. It was satisfying to discover that her involvement in church work had found recognition in academic circles as well.

Susan does not consider herself a feminist or even as having such leanings. But she has found fulfilment in being free to make decisions and to be able to stand on her own abilities and achievements. She does not have to say any longer, "I serve the Lord vicariously through Henry." For me too that has been a freeing experience. I have gained a new appreciation in my role in our partnership. In the process, our understanding of each other has deepened and our love for each other has matured. We have been prepared for our years of retirement. It serves no good purpose to bemoan the fact that we did not experience that freedom during our earlier years of marriage, family life and service. Neither of us likes to continue to psychoanalyze ourselves to find the hurts or pains that may be responsible for our present shortcomings.

We enjoyed our Altona ministry and residence in that community very much. Gerald completed all of his schooling from grades one to twelve in the Altona school system, Elaine and Norma all except one year. Elaine took one year at the MCI in Gretna, even though it was uncommon in those years for Altona young people to study at the MCI. Norma spent one year in the Elkhart High School while I attended the Seminary. Linda completed grades one to eight in Altona, then took her four years of high school in Winnipeg, one year at General Byng, one year at Westgate Mennonite Collegiate and two years at Vincent Massey Collegiate. We are happy for the Altona teachers, our children's school companions, and the community which made our children's time in school so positive. Later all of them continued their education at Canadian Mennonite Bible College for at least two or three years. In addition, they also completed degrees at universities and seminaries. Our children have been and still are a great encouragement to us. Daily we thank the Lord for them.

It lies in the nature of parents that they are concerned about their children's possible mates. Susan and I often talked about this and watched our children relate to the young people of their schools and town. We saw so many potentially suitable partners. When our daughters were chosen by fellow high school graduates as prom partners, we naturally saw mushrooming relationships in the offing. Nothing happened. All of them waited until CMBC days and everyone chose or was chosen by the best people possible. Our children's spouses are so

positive and complementary that there really is no difference between children and in-laws. We are all one loud, debating, arguing, loving family.

By now our family has grown to 19 members and still enjoys the traditional family gatherings at Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving. If all of us can agree and find a suitable weekend, we like to spend it in a hotel with a swimming pool and sometimes a water slide. Our first such experience was spent at the Manitobah Inn near Portage la Prairie. Such closeness brings with it feelings of belonging. Our own worship service on such Sunday mornings are joint projects and all enjoy participating. Although Susan and I cannot plan our families' future, we trust we have provided a few guidelines and have shared some influences that will help our grandchildren formulate their own values to face life's challenges.

Our family consists of Gerald, his wife Esther (Neudorf), and their three children, Nathan, Bradley and Virginia; Elaine, her husband Abe Bergen, and their two children, Jeremy and Rachel; Norma, her husband John Thiessen, and their two girls, Laura and Julia; Linda, her husband Eckhard Claassen, and their two children, Jonathan and Vanessa.

14

Native Ministries

The literature in the elementary school where I attended introduced us to a noble red man discovered by Columbus. That good man and his happy hunting grounds were all we knew about the people who had lived on the Prairies before our great-grandparents arrived. Occasionally we would find an arrow in our cultivated fields or, even more exciting, a stone hammer. Although Louis Riel was portrayed as a rogue who had deserved to be hanged, I sympathized with him. When the Hudson's Bay Company store was built in 1927 in Winnipeg, part of its fifth floor was used to set up a Riel display. I would visit there whenever possible. I was drawn to that man and his cause.

Vividly I recall the day when an Indian drove into our yard. Reportedly he was a chief from the Roseau Indian Reserve. He was neither red nor did he appear to be very noble. He was bashful, reserved and rather limited in the use of the English language. His poorly fed horse presented a far different image than the fast, sleek ponies we had seen in pictures. What struck me positively was my parents' treatment of that stranger. Father invited him into our summer kitchen and offered him a chair. Mother began to prepare a meal for him. She served potatoes, fried eggs, slices of bread and milk—the same meal she would have prepared for her favourite sister. What also struck me was that this nobleman was a beggar. I did not have the historical resources nor the understanding to know why this was so. Nor did we try to delve into his or our past to discover whether there was any relationship. I did not suspect that our farm, which my grandfather had worked since before the turn of the century, might have been that man's father's happy hunting ground.

As I grew older I simply accepted the reality that Indian people from the Roseau Reserve came to Mennonite settlements to beg. I don't know whether any of our neighbours engaged those silent, subdued, seemingly lazy strangers in conversation. Maybe out of a certain feeling of guilt, and also to facilitate their moving on to the next yard, most of our people freely gave food, grain or clothing. It seems we could do no other than share of our relative abundance.

Years later I had to choose whether to do my alternative service by working on a large pig farm or by teaching on an Indian Reserve. I chose the latter. My wartime experiences on the Cross Lake Indian Reserve helped me begin to sort out many misconceptions about Indians. I became keenly interested in their social and spiritual welfare. I learned that they were not necessarily lazy but defeated. Their hunting and fishing lifestyle did not call for the schedule of a farm routine. Their concept of time was more circular whereas ours was straight. If my church had not decided that Susan and I should go to Mexico, we would have accepted an invitation from the United Church to work on the Poplar Indian Reserve. And, because I had started studying the Cree language, work among Canada's aboriginal people might have become my life's occupation.

My experiences at Cross Lake led me to believe that the Mennonite understanding of the Christian faith had a dimension which should be applied in Indian ministries. At that time both the United Church of Canada and the Roman Catholic Church appeared to be agents of the Canadian government. Their approach seemed to be that the Indian was to be subdued totally and his culture and language destroyed. He was forbidden to speak Cree within hearing distance of the teacher. Rations, that is, relief food from the government, was given at the discretion of the minister or the priest. Refusal to have a child baptized was reason enough to withhold flour or bacon. Families that did not relate to the church were promised more flour or other food if they became active. As I observed this I came to the conclusion that our Anabaptist conviction of adult baptism on confession of faith based on free choice would serve the Indian people better.

When David Schulz, J. W. Schmidt and John B. Braun visited Susan and me in Winnipeg in 1950, they invited us to a three-fold task: teaching at Elim Bible School, preaching and working in the Bergthaler Church and helping with the church's outreach ministry through Mennonite Pioneer Mission (MPM). For the next 16 years I was secretary of MPM, recording all board and executive minutes. In

addition I was also designated Field Director.

The MPM had been founded primarily to do the Bergthaler Church's mission work in Mexico. However, its charter also referred to ministries in other areas of need. Over the years various members of the Bergthaler Church had been in contact with the Native inhabitants of Canada. Especially significant were those who had worked on Indian reserves as alternative service recruits during the war. Others had been drawn to those mysterious strangers in our midst during their many years of begging. Our church thought it was ready for a more focused ministry.

For several decades David H. Loewen of Gretna had been a lonely pleading voice in the Bergthaler Church, advocating mission work beyond our own circles. Repeatedly, he had preached missions and had applied to various overseas mission boards. All had rejected him and his wife for health reasons. Although Loewen, a poor unorganized orator, had become unwanted in most of our pulpits, his mission emphasis prevailed. He had been a strong advocate of our involvement in Mexico. Now he spoke for an active ministry with Native people in our own country.

Our first official contact with aboriginal people was made in 1948 when David Schulz, J. N. Hoepfner and J. W. Schmidt made an excursion into Manitoba's inter-lake region, including a stop-over at Matheson Island. Although few details of that limited foray into so-called Indian-Metis territory are available, contacts were made and interest shared. A merchant at Matheson Island, Edward Kirckness, sent a letter of enquiry which eventually came to the Bergthaler Church leadership. That letter was the Macedonian call for which the church was waiting. The sender later maintained that the letter had been meant for the Anglican Church, but it paved the way for sending our first workers, Jacob and Trudy Unrau, in 1948.

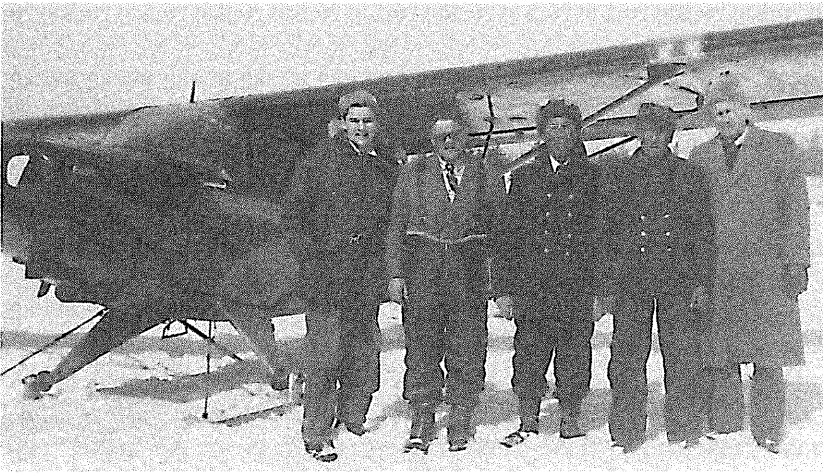
Although unofficially I already had recorded minutes at several MPM meetings in 1949, I was elected secretary in December 1950. J. W. Schmidt was chairman; George Groening, my brother-in-law and minister in Morris, was vice-chairman; and John N. Braun, a farmer from Altona, was treasurer. Members of the board were: Henry Petkau, A. J. Klassen, John Kroeker, D. W. Friesen, Theodore Groening and David Schulz as leader of the church. Our task was to provide moral and financial support for the Unraus, to explore further areas of need and to locate personnel who might be able to meet those needs. I wrote the minutes until 1967 when the constitution no longer permitted me



Getting ready for house visitation at Matheson Island with Susan, Elaine and Gerald.

to serve on the board. The work of Field Director gradually shifted to George Groening in Winnipeg.

Between 1948 and 1966 we developed mission compounds at Matheson Island, Cross Lake, Manigotagan, Loon Straits, Bloodvein and Pauingassi. For a time we also worked at Pine Dock and Jack Head.



On a field trip to Pauingassi in 1955 with (from left): Henry Neufeld, missionary there; Johnny Kehler, owner and pilot of the plane; and two Council members from Little Grand Rapids.

Our long-time staff included Jake and Trudy Unrau, Otto and Margaret Hamm, Edwin and Marge Brandt, Henry and Elna Neufeld and Ernie and Margaret Sawatsky. Many other teachers, nurses and voluntary workers gave shorter terms of service.

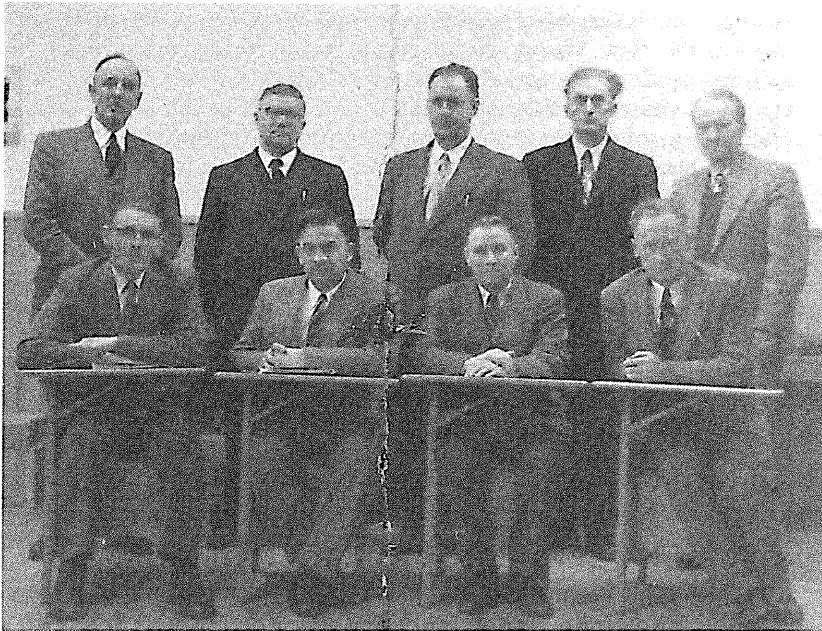
Although no deliberate plans were made to do so, it appears that the United Church pattern became our model as we built missionary residences, worship centres and made serious attempts to supply teachers and nurses for certain settlements. Our presence in the Lake Winnipeg area, at Cross Lake and Pauingassi made a profound impact on those communities. Groups of believers emerged at Matheson Island, Cross Lake, Loon Straits, Manigotagan and Pauingassi.

The chief of Bloodvein, Alfred Cook, observed closely what the Jake Unraus were doing at Matheson Island. He was determined to have that kind of teaching emphasis brought to his people as well. I still treasure his letter. His handwritten invitation to the Mennonites (called Menyonites in his letter) to come to Bloodvein to open a school was signed by 16 local families. I took that letter to the government official in Winnipeg who was responsible for special Indian schools and was abruptly told we would never get permission. He said he would call a meeting with the people at Bloodvein who would have a priest sitting at the table as they cast their open ballots. He was sure their desire for a Mennonite school would melt like snow. After that discussion I wrote a letter to the Federal Minister of Northern Affairs, Warner Jorgenson, with a carbon copy to Prime Minister John Diefenbaker. Included in my letter was a copy of Alfred Cook's letter. A few days later I received an urgent telephone call from the same government official who had belittled the Indians and my request. He informed me that there had been a change of policy and that we could move into Bloodvein.

Initially the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba appointed all MPM board members and carried the financial load of supporting the workers and building all facilities. But winds of change were developing. During the late 1940s, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada had established a Foreign Missions Committee. David Schulz was its chairman. As bishop of the Bergthaler Church he was also intimately connected with the MPM. Since George Groening and I were centrally involved in the administration of the MPM, we were asked to share our reports with him. They became part of Schulz's regular reports to the Canadian Conference. Soon the Conference began to make nominal contributions to MPM work. By 1953 there

were overtures to bring the Bergthaler work closer to the Canadian Conference. A number of joint meetings followed and, in 1957, a plan was accepted by the Church and the Conference to amalgamate the two committees. Between 1957 and 1960 the separate committees remained intact, but worked together. After that the official transfer took place.

The Conference missions committee henceforth had two sections, the home mission work and the MPM work. The executive of the MPM—George Groening as chairman, Bernie Loepky as vice chairman and I as secretary—were incorporated into the new committee. The amalgamation resulted in rather serious negative consequences for the Bergthaler Church and its missions committee. The committee had lost its administrative responsibility and the Church had lost its mission field. It seemed that the proposal for merger had not been understood. It stated that the Church would not give up the mission but become part of a larger ministry, the work across Canada. But Indian work did not develop in other parts of Canada. The board



Joint Mennonite Pioneer Mission and Canadian Conference Home Missions committees (back row): Herman Lepp, C.J. Warkentin, William Pauls (CMC), John N. Braun, George Groening (MPM); (front row): David Schulz (MPM), Gerhard Peters (CMC), J.W. Schmidt and I (MPM).

members who initially became part of the larger body were not reelected. Indian work for many former ardent supporters in the Bergthaler Church soon became a lost memory. First the church had lost its work in Mexico. Now it no longer had its work in northern Manitoba.

The transfer of Native missions from the MPM and the Bergthaler Church to the Canadian Conference also affected my relationship to Native ministry. In 1963 David P. Neufeld was appointed Executive Secretary of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. His assignment included administering the Native work. I turned over all my files and subsequently recorded only the executive and board minutes. New board members from across Canada became active. As my schedule in Altona became increasingly busy, I gave less and less attention to MPM work.

My final report at the 1966 Canadian Conference sessions on the University of Winnipeg campus included my swan song. I quote part of it in abbreviated form:

History records that when reports were made to the Pope about discoveries in the New World, the explorers were also interested in the spiritual needs of the new-found natives. That was almost 500 years ago. The church of that time played a very important role in the discovery and bringing into subjection of the proud inhabitants of this western hemisphere. Catholic priests will always be remembered for their undivided and heroic devotion to the Indian people. Here in Manitoba we remember the great Methodist missionary heroes like James Evans, Samuel Gaudin, Fred Stevens and others.

Our Mennonite forefathers came to Manitoba about 23 years after the first Methodist work had been started at Norway House. Some of the early villages were in close proximity to the most southern Indians living on the Roseau Reserve. Immediately the Indian people began to come to the Mennonite homes asking for help. This type of begging, while it provided contact, set a precedent, and for 92 years we have repeated this type of "kindness." No records have been kept of the amount of money, grain, food, old clothing and blankets that have been given, often to bring relief to the uneasy conscience of the giver.

Through World War II a new phase of contact with the Indian people presented itself. The government recognized teaching in Northern Manitoba Indian Schools as justifiable work for conscientious objectors. Approximately 27 young men from various Mennonite churches availed themselves of this opportunity. Permit me to quote from Peter Fast's paper, *The Mennonite Pioneer Mission: A Venture of Faith*: "After the war these men saw the need for a true gospel witness. Many were alarmed at the type of Christians produced on old

established church mission fields. A form of godliness was produced, steeped in formalities and rituals. This situation gave these men all the more impetus to seek ways and means of challenging the neglected Indian and Metis with the Gospel of Christ." And so, in 1948, after a costly and unhappy venture into mission work in Mexico, the Mennonite Pioneer Mission of the Berghaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba, directed its attention to the Indian and Metis people of our northland.

During these 18 years, the MPM has probably spent more than \$100,000 on six residences, five chapels, boats and motors, electric light plants, tractors, bombardier, power toboggans, and similar equipment and furnishings. The mission has spent several hundred thousand dollars on salaries, travel and insurance. This presents us with the legitimate question: What do we have for this quarter million dollar-plus investment? How many souls have been won?

The MPM does not have a central tabulation office where all first-time decisions are recorded. After some discouraging initial experiences with those who had been "wonderfully saved" our workers came to see that making disciples among our northern people was not so easy. The people did not want experience; rather, they wanted to discover that they were accepted. They wanted to see the Christian faith and this required time. They wanted to be someone. But if it is necessary to point to changed people, our missionaries could point to a pastor's wife in North Dakota, to a minister's wife in Saskatchewan, to a missionary of the Northern Canada Evangelical Mission, to an office worker in the YOU, to Sunday School teachers, mothers, fathers, students, teachers, and various fishermen and labourers. They could say we have small, yet dynamic congregations at Cross Lake, Manigotagan, Matheson Island, Pauingassi and Loon Straits. Our workers could also say that hundreds of children have been touched by Christian teachers. Many people have been influenced by Christian nurses. When I recall my first trip to Cross Lake 23 years ago and a subsequent trip in 1949 to Grand Rapids and to Norway House, and compare the North with what there is today, I see tremendous changes. Our mission has led the way in a revolution in the schools of the lake region. At that time we were strangers and unknown and also unwanted. Today we have been accepted by the people, the various governments and institutions. The Catholic Church respects us and the United Church looks for fellowship and sharing of work.

This presentation was to bring us to the present. I cannot help but take one look into the crystal ball and say a few words about the future. Peter Fast closes his paper with the following sentence: "This ends this part of the story of the MPM, a venture of faith for greater ventures ahead." Today we have entered a new phase of involvement. All kinds of doors are opening to us. Our workers, I believe, will be qualified to meet the challenges of this exciting era. Our churches will be willing to provide the funds that are needed and our government will be willing to invest heavily in this new Mennonite venture. But the work will stand

or fall on the ability of our Mennonite constituency of Winnipeg and the churches of southern Manitoba and southern Alberta to fully accept the Indian and Metis and allow him to be assimilated to the degree which he chooses, into our schools, neighbourhoods, economic structures and churches. Failing here, our ways will once more part as our sister churches have experienced it. The ventures before us will be immensely more challenging than those we have already met. Only as we prepare ourselves to pay this price, need we go forward.

As I reflect on MPM's work with Native people, I am aware of some shortcomings. Our ministry in Loon Straits did not give enough attention to the Christians who were there. It is true that we were invited to Loon Straits, but we did not fully understand that invitation. We gave it our own slant. They had meant we should help them; we took over completely. The clash that followed is one of our darker chapters. There were Christians like Garf and Gladys Monkman, Gladys Moat and Kay Monkman. They were believers with a Plymouth Brethren understanding of church polity. We did not respect their faith and sincerity and forced on them a view of the church which they did not share. Consequently, they asked us to withdraw. We ignored that and built a mammoth mission house and developed our own group. First, their ministry folded, then ours did. Since then I have apologized and asked for forgiveness on behalf of the Conference. Kay Monkman was very gracious and accepted it, although she would have liked other leaders to acknowledge our blunders too. Garf Monkman has not yet accepted our apology.

One of the beautiful victories of our ministry in the Lake Winnipeg region might be the gradual move to faith by a Matheson Island woman. On one of my many administrative trips to the north, Jake Unrau, our missionary, took me to the home of an Icelandic-Scottish couple. The woman, a former Salvation Army officer, had experienced shipwreck in her faith. Jake and I invited her to attend our evening services. She came and, after every service, she remained behind to run down God and the church. She was bitter, vehement in her outbursts against the Christian faith. Mary Janzen, a nurse from Alberta, was one of our workers on Matheson Island at that time. Mary continued to relate to that bitter woman. Very gradually her hardened heart softened and eventually she was restored to the faith in Christ. She died and was buried in the local cemetery. Her victorious final days and death bear testimony to the witness that was given at Matheson Island and many other places.

Much has changed since the late 1940s and 1950s. The Native people have become involved in a great revolution of self-identification and self-assertion. Our understanding of mission work has changed from the 18th century approach of establishing compounds. Together with church groups like the United Church of Canada and the Roman Catholic Church, greater emphasis is now placed on social action and bringing people together. I have no difficulty with those changes. What concerns me is the apparent absence of church planting approaches and what appears at times to be an almost uncritical openness to Native spirituality.

I am very conscious of the fact that Christian missions to the Indians from the beginning have been unkind to Native spirituality and culture. The Christian churches have cooperated too uncritically with government agencies in trying to conquer the Native people and rid them of their "savage" habits. That approach has been wrong and needs to be faced, confessed and corrected. At the same time, the Gospel ceases to be the saving Gospel when the unique historical Christ is removed from its centre. We cannot let that happen.

When we began our work with aboriginal people we naturally brought with us our own, though alarmingly limited, understanding of Native culture and religion. To our missionaries it was obvious that the Native people needed Christ as much as we did. That conviction was held even though all the Indians were either Catholic Church or United Church members. The only pagans in the north were among the white people. During the late 1940s and 1950s most Mennonites had been influenced by a fundamentalism which considered all non-evangelicals as non-Christians. Therefore, it was not difficult for our missionaries to come forward with a very positive, simple Gospel. People needed to be born into the family of God and be baptized on the confession of their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

During the early days of MPM we did not even begin to understand what is now called Native spirituality. And the brief encounters we had with it only fortified our misconception that it was demon-influenced. I received faint glimpses of it during my teaching days at Cross Lake. Albert Sinclair, my interpreter and United Church worker, would sometimes share with me. One day, after we had become very intimate with each other, he began to talk. He told me he hated me and all white people and their religion. He sketched a small drawing of a house with a porch at the front door. He explained: we white people were the house and the Indians the porch. We always walked over

them, never listening to what they had to say. I walked with my school children through dense pine and spruce forests and sometimes sensed they moved in a different mystical world, a world beyond my comprehension. An Indian funeral dirge used at most funerals reached out to a different spirit. I do not know whether the Cross Lake people, whether United Church or Catholic, had a full understanding of Native spirituality as it has developed and been fine-tuned through the last several decades, much of this by non-Indians. No one ever talked to me about sweat lodges or sweet grass ceremonies in Cross Lake.

During conference reporting we were frequently critiqued for forcing our culture on the Indian people. Partly that was true. But I have yet to find a Native person, whether in Winnipeg or on the reserves, who does not want everything we have. They wanted the telephone, the electric power, the car, the radio and today the television. When I came to Cross Lake they had the Eaton's catalogue and ordered all the newest fashions and gadgets. They all had radios and some even subscribed to *Time* magazine. The Nelson River was one great highway of motorized boats. It is true we gave them the English language and we hurt their culture. Only in a totally artificial, sealed-off setting would the Indian have been able to survive without the English or French languages in Canada.

I firmly believe Canada should honour its treaties. But peoples and tribes have been moving across the face of the earth for thousands of years. The tribes that were here when the white people came had already replaced or even massacred other tribes before them. Never can greed or falsehood be justified and, where we white people have wronged or forcefully driven people into waste lands, we should compensate for their loss many-fold. At the same time we cannot turn back the clock. Rather than continuing to accuse and counter-accuse, confess and seek confessions, we should work together for a better future. Our earth has only a limited number of acres of arable land. No one tribe or nation can forever claim it was here first. That is consistent with a basic Indian understanding: the earth belongs to the Lord and we may use it.

Many sincere Mennonite families took aboriginal children into their homes as part of their Christian ministry. Those children fit in and behaved well in their early stages of development. But when they entered their teens, difficulties frequently developed and the child became impossible to integrate and keep in the family. Often the adoptive parents thought that now the true Indian characteristics were

emerging. That problem developed in the best homes to the frustration of well-meaning Christian parents.

There may have been a hundred subtle reasons why the Native child rebelled against the spirit and rules of the home that had been so kind. However, there may also have been some rather obvious causes why that happened. Indian girls have said they were accepted by all until white boys began to be attracted to them. Although they had been adopted into a Mennonite home, other mothers did not want their boys to date them. Also, Indian girls have said nice white men, active members of the church, thought they should have privileges with them that they would not have asked of white girls. Those and other realities turned the Native children against the faith and culture of the homes and people that adopted them.

We have come a considerable distance in understanding Native people. Many aboriginal values like hospitality and sharing are worth preserving. It was customary for a hunter to divide the moose meat among reserve people and keep the worst piece for himself. It might have helped if we had tried harder to preserve Native languages. We would make the lot of aboriginal people in our society easier if we would develop more opportunities for employment for the many unemployed among them. And, we should accept the reality that not all reserves to which the Indians were forced years ago really have a viable economic base. We should try harder to understand their cultural and spiritual values. At the same time we are representatives of Jesus Christ. Through word and deed we need to share the riches that are in Christ. That has been the commission of the church through the ages; that remains our mandate today.

It is my deep conviction that our aboriginal ministry can survive only as we follow New Testament principles. We are fellow workers of Christ as we, together with the Indian people, build his church. That church is made up of believers who have committed themselves to Christ and follow him in discipleship and service. We recognize the Indian's deep desire for spiritual values. That desire finds fulfilment in Christ as it has been experienced by believers of all peoples through the ages. We also recognize the wrongs we have committed against Canada's aboriginal people and together with them we must find solutions which recognize their dignity and honour. Together we must build the church and also the land and country they and we love.

15

Beyond the Bergthaler Church

It was the mid 1920s and I was about 10 or 11 years old. A strange new class of people had invaded our tranquil Lowe Farm Sommerfelder stronghold. These men's trousers were of foreign make and their dialect had not been learned from our grandparents. They were simply different. And, as has been the case from time immemorial, difference was reason enough to raise suspicion. They needed to be watched.

Together with some other boys I hid underneath and behind some wagons and horses at the hitching rail behind Rosner's store, scrutinizing suspiciously five or six of those arrivals. What strange clothes and caps! Some wore a kind of shirt or smock over their pants all held together with a kind of belt. And their language! Some of their words sounded simply hilarious. When they referred to making hay they said, *Hau Aust*. Every Low German Lowe Farm boy knew it should be pronounced *Hei Eiwst*. It seemed as if their vowels were formed farther back in their throats. However, what probably annoyed us fellows and our parents more than anything else was that they seemed to exude a kind of superiority. We were all lowly, humble farm folk. They acted as if they were better than we.

They spoke of their former beautiful homes on estates, their huge fruit gardens and their vast fields. With growing nostalgia they yearned for their former homeland, Russia. Here in Canada everything was so small and so primitive. This was the wild West of which they had heard. With some disdain they volunteered that our fruit consisted of bitter sour wild cherries, measly fruit called plums, prairie strawberries

and rhubarb. Obviously they looked down on Canada as an underdeveloped country which was now to be their permanent home. Naturally we boys knew better. Canada was a beautiful and good country. Our wide prairie road allowances and natural hay fields had the juiciest strawberries. And the chokecherry pies our mothers made were most delicious. How could anyone dare insult our mother's chokecherry *Mooss* and boast that the fruit in Russia was more superior?

Actually, I already knew a little about these people. The *Mennonitische Rundschau*, a Mennonite newspaper, had carried numerous articles about their suffering and starving. The communist revolution had hit them hard. I recalled how I had crept out of my *Schlopbenkj* (sleep bench) at night and had lain on the cold floor to be able to empathize with them. We thought those poor dispossessed people would be like the Indians and beg for our help. We had looked forward to assisting them liberally. But, none of us had anticipated these superior aristocrats who would have money to buy farms, implements and stock. Why didn't they go back to their beautiful communist Russia and continue to enjoy its large juicy plums?

What we boys did not comprehend was that history had played a strange trick on us. We did not perceive that our humble, coarse Mennonite culture was not far removed from its *semelin* days and that the Lowe Farm non-Mennonite society was just beginning to emerge from its primitive, "Yankee"-bachelor mould. My own paternal grandfather had lived in a *semelin* only 45 years earlier and had broken the prairie sod on his homestead with a team of oxen. These new people extolled the benefits of their advanced secondary, agricultural and business schools and even boasted that their wives had been to special schools for girls. We simply couldn't fathom this.

As recently as five years earlier some of our good Mennonite fathers had been jailed for not sending their children to a public elementary school in a district almost totally Mennonite. We fellows hiding under wagons and horses could not appreciate that these new settlers, who seemed so strange to us, and their forebears had been moulded by far-reaching reform movements in Russia over the past 75 years. In the meantime our forebears had been hidden away in the culturally stagnant, safe oasis of the Bergthaler colonies in Russia, then had migrated to southern Manitoba where separation from English society had been stressed. Now we were unknowingly embracing rapid acculturation into the rustic mosaic of the Canadian way of life as it coagulated in our frontier Lowe Farm community. That was a very

different world than the one these new settlers had developed in Russia.

Some people referred to these intruders as Moscowites. Less charitable ones called them *Russe* (a derogatory form of saying "Russians") or communists; our more mature parents called them *Russlândia* (Russians). They in turn called us *Knadja* or *Kanadier* (Canadians). In reality we were all *Russlândia*. Our forebears had come only 50 years earlier. Even so, those designations carried mutually uncharitable connotations. For us, *Russlândia* meant a people who thought they were superior to us, who were domineering in church and conference relationships, and who manifested a business acumen that appeared questionable to our Sommerfelder parents and businessmen. They acquired this world's material goods much faster than our parents and grandparents had, not acknowledging that the hard struggles of our pioneers not only had made credit easier to obtain but also had created the potential for faster progress. To them the word *Knadja* or *Kanadier* meant a people who were backward, uneducated, uncultured, unaggressive and, according to some comments, even lazy. What had happened during those years of separation? Why the wide gulf? Why the suspicion?

In reality, the separation had occurred much earlier than 1874 when our grandparents left Russia. It began in Prussia before 1790 and continued in Russia for another hundred years. Reforms of various intensities and dimensions swept through western and eastern Europe and Russia, beginning in the 18th and continuing into the 19th century. Even in Russia already some Mennonites had embraced the reforms; others had feared them. Those men, who were feeling strange in a mildly hostile society as they huddled around their wagons behind Rosner's General Store, were the product of that cultural, technological, philosophical and religious renaissance which had threatened my great-grandparents until they left for a safer refuge in the stony wilderness of undeveloped *Jant Sied* (the other side, referring to the reserve on the east side of the Red River) in Manitoba.

Now we were brought face-to-face with those who had breathed comfortably that strange new humanism which our forebears had tried to escape through emigration. In his recent book, *None But Saints*, the English anthropologist James Urry, put a more human face on the ill-understood apprehensions of our great-grandparents. Wisely, our forebears had perceived that those vast reforms threatened the traditional, simplistic though profound faith and way of life so dear to the

Mennonites. Not understanding the sweeping ramifications of the reforms, they had found it simpler to say that they wanted to leave Russia because the prospect of having to do military service was threatening their sons. And that had been true—but it wasn't the whole story.

The small enclave of Russian immigrants north of town, which we called Little Moscow, did not drastically change the way of life in Lowe Farm. There were simply too few of them to make much difference. Initially they felt awkward in our churches. When one of them tried to blend his beautiful, trained tenor into our traditional, nasal Sommerfelder choral singing, people were outraged. The stares he absorbed after the service were enough to keep him away after that. For their immediate well-being the new emigrants established their own worship services. When the two groups finally did merge, their influence was negligible. My future, more wholesome contacts with the people we called *Russlândia* came later and were much more positive. After all, they really were part of us. They too had felt threatened by many dimensions of the reforms. And, not only did they become part of us, we also learned from each other and together became part of a more wholesome body.

When I came to the MCI for Bible school and high school training some ten years later, the *Russlândia* already had a powerful grip on the school. In fact, the MCI teacher who influenced me most was a *Russlândia*, Mr. Gerhard H. Peters. But it was also at the MCI where I obstinately decided that I would work with and stand up to the *Russlândia*. I would not take a back seat to them as so many of our *Kanadier* ministers had done when the *Russlândia* became strong in our churches and conferences. The key for me was that I would no longer be the boy underneath the wagon listening critically to what we perceived was an air of superiority. I would no longer be hurt. The struggle would be hard, at times very difficult. They had a head start of many decades on me. Many a time I had to fight bitterness — bitterness against my forebears for attempting to hide me, for depriving my parents and us of the opportunity to get advanced education, and bitterness toward the *Russlândia* who often acted so ruthlessly superior.

An experience during my Grade 12 year tested my resolve to work with them to the limit. Between 1937 and 1940 I had a teacher who promoted the great achievements of Adolf Hitler. Naturally he never told us, and I assume he did not know, of Hitler's design on the Jews.

I found the literature from the Canadian branch of the Hitler *Jugend* (Hitler's youth organization) challenging. My name was on their mailing list although I don't recall having signed up as a member. Then came the war and its reality. I began to realize that the mail I was getting was under scrutiny. I cancelled my subscription to the monthly magazine and talked to that teacher. He was very upset with me and said rather unpleasant things, including, "You crazy *Kanadier* have reported me to the authorities." I had not done that, although I had suspected some people who might have done so. I was hurt. I still recall how I resolved to continue to work with the *Russlândia* because there were so many good people. However, I was equally resolute that I would not take a back seat to them.

An incident from the early 1950s never quite left me. A group of conference workers, which met in the old Bethel Mennonite Mission facilities in Winnipeg, began projecting new approaches to Sunday School work within the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. In my recollection, of the group of twelve, I. I. Friesen and I were the only non-*Russlândia*. The discussion centred around appointing someone to spearhead a Sunday School reform initiative. It seemed that I would be the leading candidate for that position.

Everything went well until one influential minister said, "Es musz aber jemand von Druieben sein" (But it must to be someone from Russia). For a brief, fleeting moment I found myself once more cowering underneath the wagons and horses behind Rosner's store, perceiving the sentiment, "You are inferior." I conquered that inner urge and remained positive. I was not appointed leader of a new Sunday School committee but I was named its secretary and, through that appointment, became one of the key people to organize the first all-Canadian Sunday School convention which convened in Calgary in 1954. The convention was a tremendous success, not because I won out against anyone, but because I cooperated and worked hard with the leader, Henry T. Klassen from Rosthern (Sask.) Bible School.

For 50 years I have worked with the people called *Russlândia* in many conference settings. Several outstanding Manitoba *Russlândia* leaders, including Paul. J. Schaefer, Peter A. Rempel and Johann D. Adrian, all well-qualified teachers from Russia, became my mentors and promoted me. Another *Russlândia* with whom I worked well together was Gerhard Ens. To my regret I was not always positive and at times permitted my earlier defensiveness to interfere and even frustrate relationships.

Years later, just after I had been installed as General Secretary of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, a dear *Russlândia* brother, educationally much better prepared than I was, challenged me, "Well, Henry, what makes you think you are the best qualified person for that position?" I could not help but be reminded of the past and again feel that I was considered not good enough. My answer was short and simple, "I am not aware of any special qualifications except that I was asked."

Much of my ministry beyond the Bergthaler Mennonite Church has happened together with my brothers and sisters from those later migrations. It has been a good experience. On occasion I have felt twinges of guilt and have even been told that I betrayed my own people of the 1870s' migration. I trust I have not done that. My hope is that I have contributed to a better understanding between the two groups so that the differences have been bridged and we recognize that we all belong together. In our own family that has happened. Our son married a girl whose forebears came during the 1920s, two daughters married fellows whose parents came after World War II, and one daughter married into a Prussian family that had never been to Russia. Through that mix we are *Kanadier*, *Russlândia* and later arrivals blended together. In our home the children never learned to know the terms *Kanadier* and *Russlândia*.

The Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba

The Manitoba Conference had a slow, faltering beginning. For a number of years that conference was made visible through a dynamic *Jugendkomitee* (youth committee). Included in the committee were people like Paul J. Schaefer, Gerhard Ens, P. A. Rempel, John P. Dyck and J. N. Hoepfner. This was the group which hired me to organize Summer Bible Schools in southern Manitoba. Before I was married I did the work together with a widower, Peter Epp. I continued it in the early 1950s while teaching at Elim Bible School. It was a positive experience and also supplemented our income.

From the beginning, the Bergthaler congregations were actively involved with the Manitoba Conference through the strong presence of David Schulz, D. D. Klassen, J. M. Pauls and many others. G. G. Neufeld, Boissevain and Schulz served as chairman and vice-chairman for many years. Later Schulz also served as chairman and was on many committees. From 1958 to 1963 I served on the Program Committee.

Although the membership of the committee changed from year to year, I served with men like David Fast, Chortitz, minister of the Steinbach Mennonite Church; Peter Harder, lay minister in Arnaud; Henry Poettcker, Canadian Mennonite Bible College; and Wilhelm Enns, leader and bishop of the Springstein Mennonite Church.

The work on the Program Committee was mostly rewarding, but at times also somewhat frustrating. In those days the levels of authority among church leaders was very clear. There were deacons, ministers and bishops. In the Program Committee only Enns was a bishop, which automatically made him a member of another conference entity, namely the elite *Ältestenrat*. Today we might call it an ad hoc Council of Bishops. Although it had no official conference status, that august body was very powerful. They discussed issues in advance and at points made independent decisions. I found it rather frustrating one time when we as the Program Committee had worked for several hours to develop a program for the next conference session. Later Enns presented quite a different proposal with the words, "Die Ältesten haben beschlossen" (The bishops have decided). The Program Committee had not even seen the proposal. In later years I rebelled against that kind of procedure.

My most interesting experiences with the Manitoba Conference came when I was secretary of the Executive Committee from 1964 to 1966. First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, known as the Schönwieser Gemeinde, had been forced to withdraw from the Canadian Conference during the 1930s. The details of that withdrawal probably will be dealt with in two separate publications now in preparation, one a history of the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba, the other the story of First Mennonite Church. Some of the material relating to that action is still classified and will be made public some time in the future through the family of the main player of that sad development, Bishop Johann Enns.

In 1963 our Executive Committee felt it was time to initiate a healing process between the Manitoba Conference and First Mennonite. Conciliation had already taken place with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and the General Conference Mennonite Church, but the church still was not part of the Manitoba Conference. In a conversation with Bishop Johann Enns, Paul Schaefer, chairman of the Conference, subtly suggested that it might be appropriate for First Mennonite to apply for admission to the conference. I was not the initiator but became one of the main players in the three-year drama

that ensued. A personal experience may have played a role in getting these discussions going.

Paul Schaefer's first wife had endured an agonizing time with terminal cancer in one of the city hospitals. During her illness, ministers of First Mennonite tenderly ministered to her physical, spiritual and emotional needs. Through that encounter with Johann Enns, Schaefer became convinced that a reconciliation should take place between the Schönwieser Church and the Manitoba Conference. Our Executive appointed three reputable ministers, A. J. Neufeld, Killarney, P.G.Dueck, Lowe Farm, and J. W. Schmidt, Altona, to begin discussions with First Mennonite. Their meeting with ministers and church council went well. They brought a recommendation to our next Executive meeting that First Mennonite be accepted as a member at the next Conference sessions. Then our Executive began discussions with First Mennonite Church Council Executive, led by John Enns, son of the bishop.

All went well until our decision to sponsor their request went public. Then we discovered that more work still needed to be done. A Winnipeg-based storm of protest led by Gerhard Lohrenz of Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church developed. It threatened to bring to the conference floor issues which had been dealt with previously. Our Executive Committee, which did not want a rerun of the accusations and hurts of the past, even reaching back into Russia, moved forward slowly.

During the three years of dealing with the issue, our Executive Committee had its own differences to resolve. First Mennonite portrayed the Manitoba Conference in microcosm. A strong advocate for First Mennonite was Frank H. Epp who pushed hard for immediate and decisive action and acceptance. A. J. Thiessen cautioned us not to move too quickly. Although he was not against First Mennonite, he felt that our congregations needed to understand the actions we were taking. Some Executive minutes show that we spent as much time on Schönwieser's assumed lifestyle as we did on the theological concern for which they had withdrawn. At one point it was even decided that George Groening and I should prepare a presentation on lifestyle issues to be shared with their church council and ministers. That did not happen.

Very carefully we discussed the delicate problems we faced. Finally we came up with a two-pronged proposal. By mutual agreement it was decided that First Mennonite temporarily would withdraw its applica-

tion to reenter the conference. We also suggested that none of its members attend the conference sessions to facilitate freer discussion. In turn we would prepare an Executive resolution inviting First Mennonite to become a member to avoid a negative vote. After a rather long, but mutually forthright discussion, First Mennonite leadership accepted that proposal. As a result of these discussions and negotiations I developed a warm appreciation and respect for Bishop Enns.

The resolution was discussed at the 1966 conference in Gretna. The debate was frank, yet positive. The resolution was accepted by a very wide margin. First Mennonite was invited to join the conference. In 1967, at the annual sessions in Boissevain, the church was accepted without a debate. Although I could not be at the conference, I felt positive about the outcome. By that time Schaefer had been replaced by Jake Harms as conference chairman and Gerhard Ens was back as secretary.

Credit for the success of that experience must be laid at the doorstep of our very able and highly respected chairman, Paul Schaefer. Throughout my term in the Executive I was intrigued by his gift of leadership. Our meetings, mostly in Winnipeg, were very carefully planned and executed. Schaefer did not allow us to stray far from the topics under consideration. Every comment had to add something to the discussion. All unnecessary talk was discouraged. In this way we learned to dialogue. On our way home we usually stopped at the Montcalm Motor Hotel for a midnight lunch. At such social events Schaefer was priceless. He shared freely about himself, enjoyed fun and laughed heartily without ever losing his dignified composure.

Schaefer was truly a great man and competent leader. I was enriched by my association with him. With some chagrin I recall how some years earlier I naively had spoken against a recommendation he brought to the conference. In a well prepared paper on the evolution of the lay ministry and its decline he warned the Conference not to capitulate to influences from the United States regarding the career pastoral system. He called it "Der Einfluss vom Süden" (Influence from the South). In that paper Schaefer echoed some of the concerns which his predecessor, H. H. Ewert, had raised several decades earlier and which many leaders since have recognized.

During the 17 years, 1949 to 1966, that I related to the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba I wrote countless pages of minutes for the Program Committee, for the Conference Executive and for the annual Conference sessions. We had numerous Council of Committees meet-

ings and became fairly involved with the establishment of Eden Mennonite Health Centre. As secretary I was the recipient of several disgruntled letters before the financial arrangements had all been finalized. Even years later when I served as General Secretary of the Canadian Conference I received a cold reception in one church because they felt they had been unduly pressured to support Eden.

During those years I regularly reported at annual sessions: repeatedly on Summer Bible School work, twice on Assiniboine Mennonite Mission summer camps and frequently on developments in Mennonite Pioneer Mission. In one of those mission reports I presented four recommendations: 1) We should stress maturation more than expansion; 2) we should prepare Christians for organizing the Indian congregations; 3) we should have a holistic approach in our ministry to the Indian; and 4) we should work toward establishing fellowship between Native people and our Conference. Possibly my most significant presentation at the conference was entitled, "Die Bekehrung und Pflege der Neubekehrten" (The Conversion and Care of the Newly Converted) at the 1961 conference sessions in Crystal City.

My last formal task in the Manitoba Conference came in 1966. At that time Henry Poettcker and I were appointed to represent the Manitoba Conference on an all-Winnipeg committee which invited the Billy Graham Crusade to Winnipeg. After that my Manitoba Conference experience came to an abrupt end, never to be picked up again except as an occasional speaker on its German broadcast, *Frohe Botschaft*. By then I already had become deeply involved with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. At the same time I was trying to free myself from many extra involvements to allow me time to attend Mennonite Biblical Seminary for a year and to complete my manuscript on the history of the Bergthaler Church. My years with the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba were very enriching and a time of personal growth.

The Conference of Mennonites in Canada

My involvement with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) goes back to the early 1950s. In the later 1940s the Conference established a Foreign Missions Committee. Its members included David Schulz, chairman, I. I. Friesen, secretary, David P. Janzen and C. J. Warkentin. Those men were asked to champion interest in foreign mission work within Canada. From 1950 to 1957 that committee really

had no tangible work and little to report. But Schulz was also an active member on the board of Mennonite Pioneer Mission. Therefore, the tradition developed that George Groening and I would write a report on the work of MPM and give it to David Schulz. It was then convenient for him to give that report at the annual sessions on behalf of the Conference's Foreign Missions Committee. Incidentally, Schulz favoured making the Bergthaler-initiated mission work a Conference project almost from its inception. Schulz may even have promoted mission work in Canada in order to prepare the Conference for what happened later.

Through Schulz's reporting, the Canadian Conference became increasingly interested in the work of the Mennonite Pioneer Mission and gradually began to contribute toward its operation. By 1957 a merger process had been initiated. Over a three-year period the two committees worked together. By 1960 the MPM officially had been transferred from the Bergthaler Mennonite Church to the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. Perhaps the strongest advocates for that transfer were our two bishops, David Schulz and J. M. Pauls. I supported that move, but our able former chairman, J. W. Schmidt, opposed it and George Groening was not happy about it. The other MPM board members and the church suffered a serious loss. They did not have that same affinity for the Canadian Conference as we did, consequently felt that the mission for which they had worked so hard had been taken from them. Interest in Native work began to wane in the Bergthaler Church. Conference members from the other provinces will probably never appreciate how much work and money had been put into the development of those mission stations. All missionary residences, all chapels had been built largely by the lay church members from southern Manitoba. Never again has there been a similar feeling of ownership. That is regrettable.

The terms of merger, developed before 1957, provided that the two entities, MPM and the Conference's Foreign Missions Committee work jointly from 1957 to 1960. The executive members, George Groening, chairman, Bernie Loepky, vice-chairman and I, served as executive of the MPM section; H. H. Penner and Gerhard Peters constituted the executive of the Home Mission work. The former Mission Committee chairman, H. H. Penner, became chairman of the joint Mission Board. MPM members could be elected for the constitutionally prescribed terms. My term of office ran until 1966. During most of that time I also served as secretary.

Together with many others in the Bergthaler Mennonite Church I had been active in the development of that ministry with Native people. Until the merger I had served as secretary and had made numerous administrative trips to Matheson Island, Pine Dock, Loon Straits, Manigotagan, Cross Lake and Pauingassi. One of my serious scrapes with death came on a trip to Pauingassi with a small plane overloaded with building supplies and four people. The single-engine plane was so overloaded that it did not want to lift out of the water. Two other passengers were Roman Catholic Sisters. The pilot had us rock the plane backward and forward. Finally, just before we hit the northern shore, cliffs of solid rock, the plane hesitatingly rose out of the water. Our pontoons almost scraped the rocky shoreline. Another time I flew from Pauingassi to Winnipeg on a government mail plane. Suddenly we found ourselves in a swirling thunder storm. Everything grew dark around us. Then the pilot spotted a hole in the clouds underneath us. Turning the plane up and on its side, he spiralled down until we were under the cloud.

My break with formal involvement in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada lasted only one year. In 1967 I was elected to the board of Canadian Mennonite Bible College. I never could have anticipated the challenges, victories and defeats that awaited me. The mood of the 1960s also caught up our young people and reached a peak during my term of office. Young people were surprisingly open to shedding their community dress codes and Sunday School language. Truths and traditions which had been part of their past were challenged. On one Sunday a group from our camp, all CMBC students, sang at the Sunday morning service at Altona Bergthaler Church. Unkempt, dressed in jeans with open shoe laces and shirts hanging over their jeans, they sang new camp and youth songs. Our sedate worshippers in their comfortable pews were confused. These were the nice young people who had all been to our College and I was chairman of that board. Years later I asked the leader of that singing group, now a respected, conservative theology professor at Conrad Grebel, how he would have reacted if he had been worship leader. His reaction was, "If I would have felt then as I do now, I might have chased them off the platform."

Responses to youth behaviour were similar all across Canada. Our annual Conference sessions bristled with accusations directed against the College. Our congregations felt we were sending good boys and girls there and they were returning to our churches as irresponsible rebels. Partly that was true. At the same time it must be recognized

that they were learning their radical ideas from other students within our congregations. Many voices were trying to tell the Conference to evaluate carefully what was happening. In reality our churches had lost touch with their young people. They found a place to express their rebellion and that place happened to be our College. I will never forget those trying conference sessions and all the criticism which the CMBC Board had to absorb. I particularly recall a meeting I chaired in one of our southern Manitoba churches. About 25 critics pelted me with accusations. It seemed to me that the accusers were articulating all the wrongs of the past decade which had been committed by students from our Seminary in Elkhart, Bethel College in Kansas and CMBC.

The following incident illustrates how far some College critics went at that time. One of the main spokesmen at the meeting stated that Bethel College was printing a paper called *Menstruation*. I told him that could not be true since I knew people on the faculty, especially the president. He stuck with his accusation. Next morning I called the president's office at Bethel College and learned that four rebel students had put together a paper with the name *Menstruation*. But they had issued only one paper. All four had been expelled from the College as a result.

I called the man who had said that *Menstruation* was an official College paper and, since he had made his accusation in public, I thought the honourable thing would be for him to retract it in public. He refused. He seemed to assume that people should be left with negative impressions of our Mennonite institutions. Various accusations were seen as proof that our Conference was liberal and moving in a wrong direction. And it seemed as if the Conference deficit was growing in proportion to the negative publicity.

My involvement in CMC boards concluded with the call in 1971 to serve as General Secretary of the Conference. The years from 1957 to 1971 were good ones for me. I had been exposed to many great and outstanding leaders who gave their time and resources and have now gone to their reward. They included J. B. Wiens, J. D. Nickel, Otto Bartel, William Martens, G. G. Epp, C. J. Neufeld, D. P. Neufeld, H. H. Penner, P. D. Wiens, J. Gerbrandt, Isaak Wiens, H. H. Neufeld, David Schulz, J. M. Pauls, Wilhelm Enns, Johann Enns, D. D. Klassen, David Fast, Paul J. Schaefer, Johann Adrian, P. A. Rempel, Peter R. Harder, N. N. Driedger, J. C. Neufeld, J. Wichert, Herman Lepp, John Harder, J. J. Thiessen, and many others.

Those leaders served when most church work was done gratis. All

too regularly they also had to pay their own conference expenses. J. J. Thiessen inspired me frequently when I thought the task was too overwhelming. He would ask, "Brother Gerbrandt, how old are you?" When I answered, he would reply, "Those are the best years. You are the man for it." I recall one conference where Isaak Wiens, Herbert, and I shared a bedroom. Wiens loved poetry. Dressed in a long cotton nightgown he would curl up in his bed and recite poetry until he fell asleep. All you had to do was give him a topic, whether it be religion, service or English literature. Frequently when a heavy issue faced the conference or some kind of tension developed, the chairman, J. J. Thiessen would say, "Ohm Isaak, give us a poem." On the spot Wiens would recite a fine poem, appropriate for the occasion.

It would be wrong to say that the conference sessions of those years were better than the sessions of today. They were different. The leaders of yesteryear would write papers on various issues and read them at the conference sessions where they were critiqued and discussed. Another interesting dimension of those gatherings was the hosting of the sessions. Large churches, and even tents, were used. No rent was paid and the host church provided the meals, usually at a small cost. However, I also need to say that it was primarily a male-dominated conference. Women were not sent as delegates. When the first woman delegate came she was formally asked to remove her delegate tag even though the Steinbach Mennonite Church had sent her. It seems to me the Conference was even slower than most congregations to give women voting rights. Its leadership did not want to offend the more conservative congregations.

The General Conference Mennonite Church

During my first year at Elim Bible School P. P. Tschetter, our teacher from Pretty Prairie, Kansas, introduced us to the General Conference. He was a graduate of Bluffton College. In 1936 already I began to dream of graduating from that school. During my studies I did a term paper on Peter A. Penner, the pioneer missionary. That paper led to a study of the whole General Conference outreach work in India, China and among the American Indian. The research kindled my desire to be part of that North American Conference.

Ever since its inception in 1892, the Berghaler Mennonite Church had discussed whether or not to join the General Conference. The opposition had always been too strong. That finally changed in the

1950s and 1960s. With its growing involvement in the GC overseas ministries many leaders in the Bergthaler Church felt now was the time to realize their life-long dream. I agreed and began to advocate joining. In October 1964 I wrote the following editorial in the *Bergthaler Gemeindeblatt*:

Observers at the General Conference

At the Brotherhood meeting on November 27 we will make the traditional decision to send observers to the General Conference sessions next July at Estes Park, Colorado. At these sessions these observers will be traditionally welcomed and given the traditional floor privileges. This is all very good and it would be improper to break or discontinue this good tradition of cordial relationship.

The lessons of life teach us, however, that our behaviour is never quite natural at special public occasions or when we appear in our Sunday clothes. Contacts are necessary in some kind of working or living relationship. This lesson from life should be applied to our study of the General Conference Mennonite Church. We need to observe the Conference in its work clothes.

About 72 years ago Elder Johann Funk proposed a new work program to the Bergthaler Mennonite Church. Included in this proposal was the Sunday School, the Youth program, mission work and a new relationship with other churches. For the implementation of this program, new resources and contacts were very essential. Contacts were made and have been maintained to this day with the General Conference Church. Some of these contacts are taken for granted. Every Sunday morning about two thousand Bergthaler Church members sing their hymns from General Conference hymn books. Every Sunday morning some fifteen hundred children are being taught from General Conference Sunday School materials. Since 1892 more than half a million dollars have been given for General Conference missions, education and charities. Every year Bergthaler Church delegates sit with General Conference people at the Canadian Conference sessions in July and at Manitoba Conference sessions in November. Every week *Der Bote* and *The Mennonite* are being read. Every fall Bergthaler Church members listen appreciatively to General Conference missionaries and rejoice when they are treated to their very own Anne Penner or Peter Falks.

In our observations of the General Conference we have been alerted to its weaknesses and failures. We have seen the influence of other Protestant churches in its organization and polity. We have seen how the winds of Liberalism, Fundamentalism, Neo-Orthodoxy, Evangelicalism, Ecumenicity, Neo-Liberalism, New Morality, etc., have knocked on its doors. In our fear of the bad we have sometimes failed to see the good that the Conference has shared with us in its contact

with these larger movements. From our safe detached position we have cheered and booed the Conference in its struggles through these movements, often wounded, often defeated, often victorious.

This article is not written to coerce the Bergthaler Mennonite Church to join the General Conference Church during these sessions in July. The Conference has a study committee reviewing its total structure. There is a possibility that such structural changes could be made that would make our Church a member through the Canadian Conference. But the Bergthaler Mennonite Church delegates should go to the July sessions as representatives of a maturing church that is willing to align itself with other churches in the broader and more profound struggles of the Christian faith. We should not go to Estes Park to "observe" the General Conference in its Sunday clothes with this in mind that it might help us make our decision regarding our relation to it. Our observations of the Conference in its every day work through the past 72 years should have helped us reach any decision which we want to make.

The actual joining of the General Conference was somewhat bitter-sweet. In 1968 the Bergthaler Church made the decision to allow each individual congregation to decide on its own whether or not to become a member. Most decided to do so. But it wasn't the Bergthaler Church joining as one body. By 1968 various reform pressures had brought about the localization of the church, thus preventing a more complete merger. Various developments in the General Conference also took some lustre off the euphoria we had anticipated. The present merger discussions with the mammoth Mennonite Church of North America makes many of us wonder whether the fears of David Schulz and his predecessor were justified. The Bergthaler presence becomes increasingly more minimal. It is too early to foresee the outcome of current structural discussions.

My earliest direct involvement with the General Conference came through my appointment to the Bergthaler Church Missions Committee in 1940. Together with J. W. Schmidt and Peter Epp we planned outreach activities for the church. I was instructed to be in contact with the leadership of the GC Foreign Missions Committee. Its chairman was the elder church statesman P. H. Richert. Richert was a kind man and I appreciated his influence. A shipment of mission promotion material from him got me into some difficulty. The mailing contained several German periodicals. I was asked to come to the Winnipeg Post Office. There the customs officials showed me the German materials and accused me of aiding the enemy. It was wartime and anything German was suspect. I tried to tell the official what the materials

contained. He said it would have to go through their translation branch and that would cost me money. I countered by offering to take the English material and leaving the German stuff for them to burn. They kept everything but next day sent it all to me, postage paid.

In 1953 I was appointed by the Canadian Conference Sunday School Committee to assist with the production of new GC Sunday School materials. That called for a six-week stay in Scottdale, Pennsylvania. Due to financial limitations, Susan and the children had to remain in Altona. A team of about 16 people divided the Scriptures into segments and assigned topics and wrote summaries for those biblical passages. The experience was pleasant and very rewarding. How stimulating to rub shoulders with college professors and professional Sunday School educators of the General Conference and Mennonite Church. During the six weeks we ate in restaurants with instructions to keep our food bill down. For most suppers I ordered a cheap 35-cent bean dish. On the menu was a steak-and-potato entree which I wanted to order on the last day. However, by the time my last supper came around, I thought of the family I had left behind and how Susan was serving the family meals with very little money, so I stayed with my 35-cent bean dish.

My lodging experiences remain unforgettable. I, together with W. F. Unruh, a veteran missionary from India, and Dr. Paul S. Shelly, theology professor from Bluffton, occupied an attic room in a three-story brick house. The temperature hovered above 100 degrees F. Our room temperature came down to about 93 F for the night. Although my roommates were fine men, they appeared eccentric to me. Unruh had half an onion in a half-cup of vinegar for his regular night lunch. By midnight that vinegar seemed to boil in his stomach. Shelly never felt the heat. He was cold all summer. He took a nap every day in his suit, totally covered with a blanket. I sweltered beside him in my shorts.

My encounter with Mennonite people in the Scottdale area was both challenging and disconcerting. Dr. Paul Erb, the veteran statesman, educator and author, and his illustrious wife, Alta, entertained me one Sunday afternoon. Erb was in the process of writing his book, *The Alpha and the Omega*. In our discussion he pointed out how dispensational theology had crept into Mennonite Church thinking and why he espoused an amillennialist position. But that same Erb startled me at a mid-week youth night when, to make the prairie visitors feel more at home, he suggested we sing, "Home, home on the range, where the

deer and antelope play.” That was not a song I had expected to be sung at a church youth meeting.

Then there was Dr. Paul Lederach, the youthful minister of the Scottdale Mennonite Church. On a visit in his home I looked through the reading material in his living room and discovered many secular periodicals and musical records. That threw me into a tailspin. I thought a theologian of his stature would read mostly devotional and theological works. To add to my frustration, Paul played records that included songs like “The cow jumped over the moon” to the tune “On Christ the solid rock I stand.” To this day whenever I meet Paul he laughs about my frustration.

My discussion with A.J. Metzler, administrator of Herald Publishing House, was very stimulating. Then already, more than 40 years ago, he broached the topic of merger between the General Conference and the Mennonite Church. He knew we Bergthaler people had not yet joined the GCs and invited us to join the OM Conference. Although I was attracted I told him we would be a very small, adjunct non-entity in their large body. Furthermore, I told him, even though we were not members, we still had all our ties with the General Conference. I believe Metzler’s understanding of merger in 1954 was very simplistic. He saw his group as the true Mennonite Church. The other groups would simply join the large MC complex.

Several decades later I enjoyed several other encounters with the General Conference. I served on the GC Committee on the Ministry and related to the Department of Outreach and Church Growth of the Commission on Home Ministries. Most of my experiences were rewarding, but there were some exceptions. Americans had bought much more unreservedly into the mainline Protestant concept of professional pastoral church leadership. We dealt with issues that are only now surfacing in Canada. The American emphasis on church growth and church planting efforts is being picked up more enthusiastically in our British Columbia setting where new churches are emerging. It is too early to see whether they are reaching new people for the Lord or whether most movement is within a reservoir of free-floating Christians. Very rewarding were my several years on the Commission on Overseas Mission. At that time I was completing a term for Peter Fast who had embarked on a MCC assignment in Indonesia. When the nominating committee wanted to place my name on the slate of nominees for election it was ruled out of order because the Bergthaler Church was still not a member of General Conference.

Possibly my most rewarding experience was with the GC Committee on the Ministry. Members included people like David C. Wedel, former president of Bethel College. I found Wedel very stimulating as he expounded the Christian faith and his expectations of the pastoral ministry. On one occasion the Committee sent me to speak to a minister who had divorced his wife and remarried. Although that minister wanted to continue in his work, he discovered that his congregation felt differently. Somewhat later two women, Marion Franz and Joyce Shutt, joined the committee. My introduction to Joyce remains unforgettable. I told her who I was and she said, "I hate your kind." She had had a bad experience with a person in authority and she had me pegged as someone who would want to control her. We got along very well and I still like to read her articles wherever they appear.

Probably my most concerted involvement with the General Conference came during my years as General Secretary of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. But that is treated in the next chapter, "Ministry within the Canadian Conference."

16

Ministry within the Canadian Conference

Accepting the CMC Invitation

Through several decades I worked in Altona with undivided zeal and passion. It seemed my nights were an unnecessary impingement on my work schedule. I taught at Elim for 16 years, full-time for nine years, then part-time until 1965. I ministered in the Altona Bergthaler Mennonite Church and beyond, conducted the catechism classes there year after year, and the MCI classes twice. I spoke at or conducted numerous weddings and funerals. I served as secretary of Mennonite Pioneer Mission from 1950 to 1966. I also was secretary of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba from 1956 to 1967 and edited its *Gemeindeblatt* from 1950 to 1967. I served a term on the Manitoba Conference Program Committee and for three years wrote the Conference minutes. Because of my involvement with mission work I was invited to speak at mission events in numerous churches across Canada. Often I came back to Elim on Monday morning, having stolen a few hours sleep after midnight from preparing for classes. The challenge of young expectant students revived me for another week of seven or eight sessions a day with few, if any, free periods. Looking back I cannot comprehend how I did it. I don't know why the students didn't walk out, how the church tolerated it, or how Susan and the children survived. To this day I regret how I neglected my family.

That frenzied, blind rushing about seems so ludicrous now. An incident of that time jolted me but did not slow me down. I was

supposed to preach at a funeral in the local Bergthaler Church. I taught a class at Bible School until it was almost time to begin the funeral. Quickly I dashed from the school to the church. I passed by a car and heard someone exclaim, "Hey, look, the preacher is running to church." I had done that frequently, but to that mourner it seemed inappropriate. Then at Seminary in Elkhart in 1967-68 I took a full seminary load while doing the basic research for the Bergthaler Church history project at the Mennonite Archives in Goshen. When I received a telephone call from Altona, informing me that the results from an unofficial poll had indicated that a different leader for the local church should be called, something snapped. I was not told how many people had participated in that poll nor how they had been selected. Instead of thanking the caller for the information, I felt rejected. Soon an excruciating headache developed. My secure world collapsed around me and a severe depression set in.

An Elkhart doctor suggested I might have a brain tumour or I might be close to having a nervous breakdown. He prescribed a drug, completely unknown to me at the time. Gradually I had good nights and felt well again. In fact, the double dose gave me such a feeling of well-being that at times life around me seemed unreal. Only later I discovered how addictive the large dosage of Valium had been. I became hooked on that drug. When I consulted a different doctor, he suggested that, because I had been so close to a nervous breakdown, I should stay on the drug. It took much prayer and concentrated determination to withdraw from that medication.

From 1968 to 1971 I was back in Altona, doing pastoral work as well as writing the Bergthaler Church history. That was a mammoth undertaking. It had to be done outside my working hours for the church, mostly during the night. But something had changed. My vision and passion for the church had waned. Every time I approached the pulpit in Altona, I had the bizarre feeling I was just repeating things I had said before. And every time I made a pastoral call I had the uncanny sensation that I was not really wanted. Although a good majority of our congregation had voted that I and David F. Friesen, the assistant minister, should continue in our church leadership ministry, an irrepressible uneasiness began to develop within me. It became apparent to me that it was time to leave. My work there was finished. I also had not forgotten the phone call to Elkhart which had informed me that perhaps someone else should lead the church. I came to the irreversible conclusion that I could no longer make a meaningful

contribution to the Altona congregation. I also had to accept the reality that not everyone perceived history as I had portrayed it in the Bergthaler story, *Adventure in Faith*. I had offended some people within the larger Bergthaler Mennonite Church beyond Altona. I had made mistakes in my ministry, especially in the area of relating too closely to interest and power groups within the congregation. I also had been part of the reform movement that brought about changes in the church leadership polity and, in turn, led to decentralization and eventual dissolution of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba.

The Conference of Mennonites in Canada had made several overtures to me in the past. In 1971 I received a concrete invitation to become Executive Secretary of the Conference. But there were also other invitations to congregations in several parts of Canada. Two CMBC professors, Henry Poettcker and Waldemar Janzen, came to my church office to give me encouragement. That visit probably tipped the scale for me to accept the invitation from the Conference. Although I was chairman of the CMBC board at the time, I had been apprehensive about moving into the College, that imposing academic fortress where the Conference offices were located. The Executive Secretary does not administer the College directly, but the position is closely connected with the College in its relationship to the Conference.

The move to Winnipeg was not easy for us, especially for Susan. She did not feel any call to leave Altona. Linda, our youngest daughter, was just finishing Grade 8 and dreaded leaving her close school pals. The move involved selling our home and buying one in Winnipeg. It meant separation from close friends who had been exceptionally supportive for a long time. For Susan it meant cutting herself off from friends and institutions that had given meaning to her life and being plunged into nothingness in a totally new environment. For me it meant taking hold of a ship that was wallowing badly in a rough sea on an unknown course. It meant ignoring well-aimed gibes from conference pros that suggested I was perhaps not professionally prepared to do the administrative work required. What made the criticism difficult was that I agreed with them.

After several days in the office someone cautioned me not to try too hard. He said, "The Conference of Mennonites in Canada is like the meat in a sandwich and two entities are going to squeeze it out." In Canada the provincial conferences were growing rapidly; internationally the General Conference remained powerful. Both entities were in an expansionist mode. It seemed CMC had nowhere to go but to fold.

What made matters more depressing was that delegates at the 1970 conference sessions in Winkler had threatened to cut the budget for 1970 by 25 percent. The year had ended with an accumulated deficit of \$80,000. Another problem that aggravated the situation was the very critical mood of many people regarding the College.

CMC Dynamics and Developments

The late 1960s and early 1970s had introduced a spirit of emancipation for our young people. Fellows who had come to CMBC with shirt, tie and coat went back home with shirts hanging loosely over their pants, shoe laces untied and long unkempt hair. Some students had even started to smoke and drink alcoholic beverages. Some had stopped reading the Bible. Some girls who had come to the College in dresses fastidiously sewn by their mothers went back home in patched jeans. The pressure was building that CMBC should introduce former Bible institute dress codes. In my last report as chairman of the CMBC board to the Winkler conference in 1970, I said:

During this period of cultural, economic and social revolution when almost everything we once held sacred is being challenged, uprooted and changed, we need a school that seriously attempts to retain the eternal Truths of the Scriptures in our Anabaptist traditions. At times we have been under enormous pressure to attempt to retain these eternal truths in an enforced setting of social behaviour and strict dress codes. The college believes, however, that the Word of God and the Holy Spirit are still powerful and that they will prevail. With this we are not saying that those who would legislate a more rigid lifestyle for the students are not as concerned and sincere as those who feel the student must work this out under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the directives of the Word of God. The uniqueness of the past several years has been that such dialogue has taken place, and that both the college people and the concerned constituents have come to see more clearly the issues that appear to be at stake with either position.

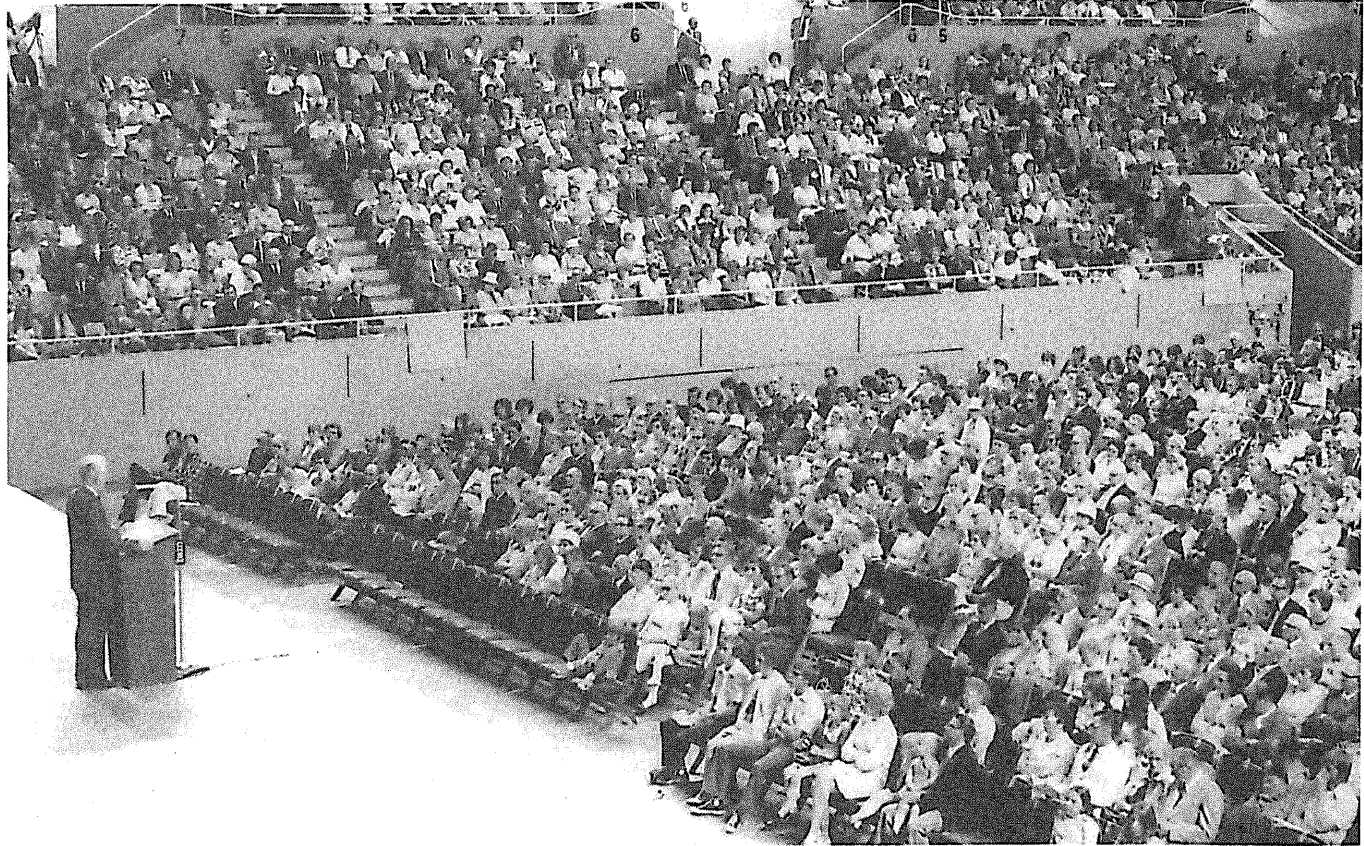
I still recall how I and President Henry Poettcker were clobbered during the subsequent discussion. Many speakers wanted the College to introduce strict dress codes.

During the ten years of my CMC administrative work many things improved to the satisfaction of its supporters. A multitude of forces merged to bring about a new era for the Conference and its various ministries. The 1970s were economically good for Canada. Crops were

plentiful, prices for farm produce were satisfactory, and business and industry flourished. Inflation ran high and money was more available. The introduction of the Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSPs) made giving of larger sums of money to churches and conferences easier. A general renewal and excitement in our churches brought about a new level of Christian commitment among CMBC students. Many new people, younger and professional, were added to the boards and brought new vision to Conference work. A series of strong executive committees provided firm leadership. The four conference moderators during that decade—Jacob Tilitzky, Jacob Harms, David P. Neufeld and Jake Fransen—were very positive and single-minded in their commitment and vision. It seems that my major contribution to that renaissance in CMC was to have been available at the right time to enjoy an era of excitement and expansion. Conference membership grew from 22,032 to 27,242, an increase of 23.6 percent, and budget income went from \$336,412 to \$1,073,441, an increase of 219 percent. The Conference became debt-free.

In 1971 when I moved into my “office,” the whole CMC staff was housed in small cubicles above the washrooms in the CMBC administration building. There was no privacy and in summer it was fiercely hot. Our staff consisted of Frank J. Dyck, Treasurer; Menno Wiebe, Executive Secretary for MPM; Henry H. Epp, Executive Secretary for Congregational Resources Board; Larry Kehler, editor of *The Mennonite* and conference editor; and staff secretaries Irene Warkentin and Sandi Friesen, later Marie-Helen Dyck. They were all hard-working, conscientious people. Marie-Helen was even bold enough to remind me to pack my overnight bag when I went on my frequent trips.

Conducting staff meetings was always difficult for me. I was more secure when I could preach and teach in the churches or find ministers for churches rather than lead these meetings. During the latter half of my term the feminist movement made things difficult. I thought we treated our women equally and fairly, but many things changed. We could no longer refer to 18- or 20-year-old women collectively as “girls.” They were now women. A young woman we had hired, whose job description included running the duplicating machine, cleaning the lunchroom and preparing coffee for staff meetings, was informed by others that her job was demeaning. Tearfully she came to me one day and said, “I came to this place in answer to prayer and I love my work. Now others tell me I need to be liberated. They tell me not to make your coffee.”



Included in assignments during my years with the Canadian Conference was giving the German address at the 1974 Mennonite centennial celebrations in the Winnipeg Arena, marking 100 years since Mennonite emigrated from Russia to Canada.

One of our secretaries had a German-speaking mother-in-law and enjoyed getting pointers from me on how to say certain things in German. She wanted to surprise her mother-in-law with German sentences. Another secretary told us one day why she did not buy a 649-lotto ticket. She was afraid she might have the lucky number and win a million dollars. That, she said, would spoil her work at the office. Then a short while later she surprised us all by announcing she was marrying a minister, a widower with three children. We dubbed this suitor her million-dollar man. When Eldon Krause joined our staff as treasurer he became fully responsible for office administration. That freed me from many frustrations. I felt more at ease travelling, knowing that our office would continue to function well.

Staff meetings benefitted when the College added its president, Dr. Henry Poettcker, to our administrative team. Henry was a strong support and an excellent administrator. I probably had too many staff meetings where we discussed issues that were of interest only to the administrators of the programs and not to the secretaries. Later executive secretaries have moved in the direction of having meetings with administrators only. The two treasurers, first Frank J. Dyck and later Eldon Krause, always tried to help staff understand where the Conference stood financially. Frank was a hard-working conscientious staff member who knew his figures and tried hard to make the rest of us comfortable with them. During Eldon's time the computer phenomenon hit us. I still recall how I resisted having the computerized receipts issued. Previously I had looked at every receipt, co-signed it and sent a letter to the donor. That letter, always personalized, kept me in touch with hundreds and hundreds of Conference supporters. Fortunately that practice has been reinstated.

I will never forget my early walking stages with my first "boss," Jacob Tilitzky of British Columbia. He was kind, soft spoken and appreciative. As conference chairman, he provided fine, inspirational leadership. We discussed issues and directions, but he left it to me to find ways and means to carry them out. Under his leadership I worked freely and boldly. It felt as if CMC was my Conference. I was also completely absorbed in running the program at annual sessions. He chaired the meetings but constantly looked to me for reminders.

After him came Jake Harms from Winnipeg, full of youthful vigour and idealism. During his term we entered into our *Umsiedler* ministry in Germany. Next D. P. Neufeld from Niagara-on-the-Lake stepped into the leadership shoes. I still remember his first General Board

meeting. He showed a film on evangelism and church growth. That theme characterized his term. Both Harms and Neufeld continued Tilitzky's style of leadership. I don't think I ever dominated the proceedings at conference sessions, yet I felt perfectly at ease seeing to it that the sessions ran efficiently. The chairmen also used the vice-chairmen to help them at the podium. I usually sat next to the chairman and, with short memos unnoticed by the assembly, I reminded them of omissions, time overruns and alerted them to nuances that they might have missed.

When Jake Fransen was elected during my last year in office, I knew that a new era had come. Jake had many years of administrative training and experience in the Department of Education in Ontario. Having served a three-year term on our CMC General Board, he also knew where we were weak. From that time on the conference would be run more obviously by the chair. Naturally, this had been done before too but not as overtly. It seemed that Jake had far less need of either vice-chairman or General Secretary (by then my title had changed from Executive Secretary to General Secretary). He did a very good job but my previous chairmen had not trained me to be that invisible. However, during the year that I still worked under him, he was most tolerant toward me, a former CMBC classmate and long-time friend. In retrospect I realize that I had become too possessive. In some quarters I was called "Mr. Conference" and, naively, I had learned to like that designation. Jake Fransen was the first chairman to hold that position for six years after the adoption of a revised constitution.

More than a year before my third three-year term was completed I tendered my resignation* to the Conference chairman, D. P. Neufeld. First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg had made overtures to me and I had consented to have an interview. I longed for another stretch in pastoral work. However, Neufeld did not accept my resignation but rather proposed that I stay in my work through the end of his term. That brought about the year with Jake Fransen and the full ten years in the CMC office.

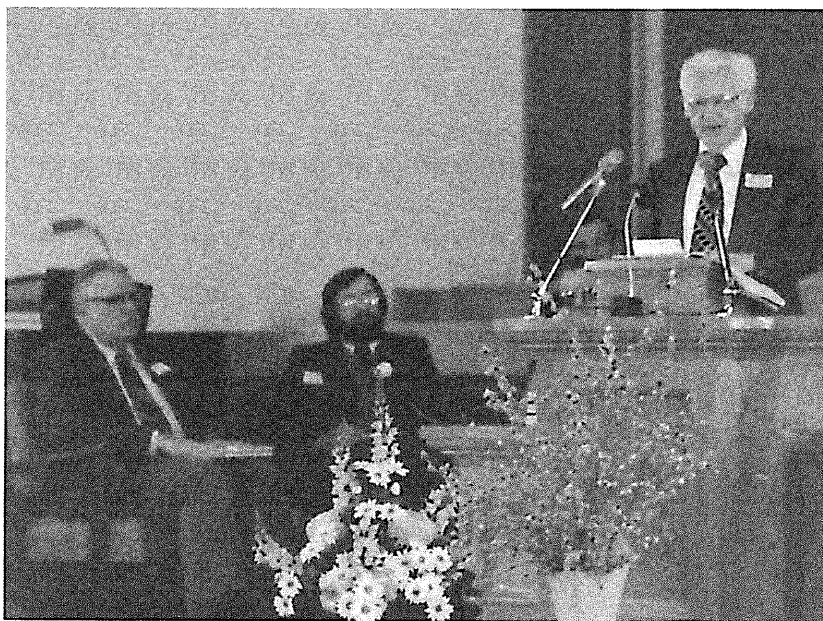
There were times when I disagreed with Conference executive decision. A major test for me came when Mennonite Foundation of Canada asked for a sum of money which we had in a special fund. That money had been collected years earlier when George Groening and I were still in the Missions-Mennonite Pioneer Mission Committee. We

* For a copy of my letter of resignation see the end of this chapter.

had levied a small amount of money, with Executive Board consent, to establish a fund for ministers who were too old for the newly established Conference pension fund. The money, about \$50,000, was invested in the Winkler Credit Union by our Finance Committee chairman Henry F. Wiebe. Frequently when we were in a temporary borrowing position we used that money as collateral to soften the interest rate.

The Director of Mennonite Foundation of Canada made an appeal to our General Board which asked staff to turn over that fund. We in the office thought the money had been raised for a specific cause and should remain with the Conference. Our General Board overruled me and Frank Dyck and ordered us to turn over the money. I don't think the money was ever used to support poor ministers or their widows for whom it was collected. We continued to support those ministers and/or their widows with Congregational Resources Board monies.

Another factor made my relationship with Mennonite Foundation of Canada more strained than it should have been. This was my first experience with some of the powerful and wealthy financiers and entrepreneurs of the (Old) Mennonite Church of Ontario. To me they



With Jake Fransen and Gerald at the 1979 annual session of the Canadian Conference in Calgary. My first experience of sharing the pulpit with son Gerald..



During the time I worked for the Canadian Conference, Susan was president of Canadian Women in Mission, seen here (fifth from right) in 1980 with Canadian and provincial executive members at the annual sessions in Rosthern, Sask.

seemed abrupt and even ruthless. I had dealt with some of our successful entrepreneurs in western Canada, but they had all been from the same cultural mould. Until then my contact with Mennonite Church members had been solely through its ministers and mission committee people. They had been so understanding. With them I had been on equal footing. This was different. Then too, most of the capital in Mennonite Foundation of Canada came from them. Our western contribution was rather negligible. I quickly learned that money speaks rather forcefully.

One of the challenges of the decade, 1971 to 1981, was adjusting to the new constitution which was accepted at the 1971 conference in Vancouver. The revised constitution abolished the Board of Christian Service, the Board of Home Missions and the Board of Education and Publication and created a new body called the Congregational Resources Board (CRB). That board became responsible for all the work of these former boards plus new work like ministerial placement. Mennonite Pioneer Mission remained intact. The Finance Committee was abolished and its task transferred to the General Board. A few years later the Finance Committee was resurrected. In addition to my work for the General Board, I also served part-time with CRB. Henry H. Epp, later Edward Enns, were the full-time employees of CRB. Epp did an enormous amount of work in setting up the Conference archives.

It was my good fortune to represent the Canadian Conference at

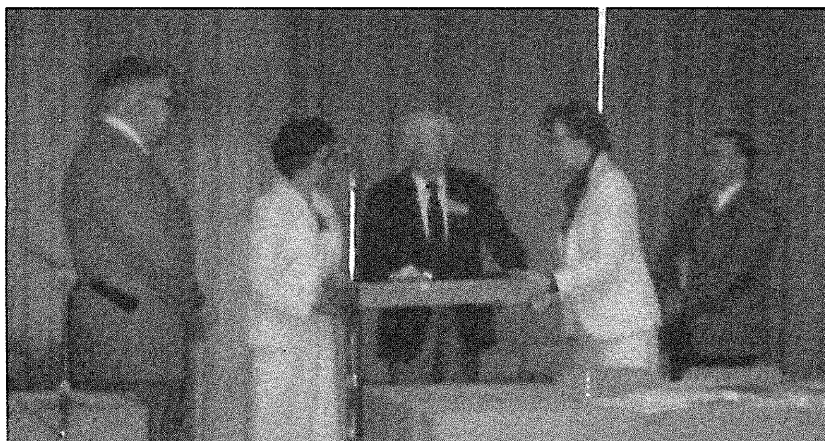
several inter-church meetings. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada repeatedly invited us to become its member. At one of its annual meetings, John R. Stott, the British theologian and churchman, gave an exposition of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I appreciated his lectures but discovered he was not good in personal conversation. I walked across the campus with him and found the walk too long. He just wouldn't talk.

For several years I represented CMC at an inter-church meeting which brought together people from the Canadian Council of Churches, many evangelicals and the Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops. One unforgettable highlight was a long walk through the monastery garden with the Archbishop of Montreal. He wanted to know what Mennonites believed and how they managed to win their children and youth. He confessed that if they wanted to wait for the children and youth of Montreal to come for baptism, none would come. At those meetings I learned to know Archbishop Hacaault of St. Boniface as a concerned Christian who defended the smaller denominational groups. I also met Archbishop Ted Scott of the Anglican Church, who told me, "Hang in there brother. You have a lot of support."

Another heartwarming experience was to be invited to have coffee with the archbishops of Ottawa and Edmonton. The Edmonton bishop wanted us Mennonites to begin to forget our years of persecution. He said his forebears too had been burned at the stake in Scotland. He claimed that when the followers of John Knox had persecuted Catholics they had done so not as Christians but as servants of the state. He said the same was true of the Catholic persecution of Mennonites. They claimed we were all much more mature today. It is unfortunate that those inter-church gatherings had to be stopped. The Pope in Rome declared that his bishops should not continue the dialogue.

During my final four years in the office I spent considerable time and energy on the ministry with *Umsiedler*,* Mennonites of German background who had remained in Russia but in the last number of years have moved to Germany where they have been accepted as German citizens. Until then our conference had confined its activities to Canada. Now a new challenge presented itself to us. Heinz Janzen, General Secretary of the General Conference, helped direct that work to us. Because of more direct ties and our common Low German dialect it

* See Chapter 17 for more detailed consideration of this work.



At the 1981 CMC sessions in Vancouver. Helen Rempel, secretary, presents a silver tray to Susan and me on my retirement from CMC work as Jake Fransen, chairperson, and Henry Funk, vice-chairperson, look on.

seemed more appropriate that work with the *Umsiedler* be done from Canada. It has been a good experience for our congregations. The General Conference through the Commission on Overseas Mission has contributed some funds to this ministry.

Relating to the Congregations

One of the challenging, enjoyable dimensions of my Conference work was relating actively to congregations. A quick check shows that I made calls on at least 123 of the 145 congregations which belonged to the Conference. Those visits included preaching on invitation, meeting with pastors, reconciliation discussions, goal-setting or evaluation meetings with councils or congregations, anniversary services, church building dedications, pastor ordinations, deeper life Bible studies, and so on.

Although I usually did not use my many visits to local congregations as opportunities for soliciting money for the conference, my relationship with people in the churches did have monetary benefits. I recall that, after a week of services in a certain congregation, the Conference later received a cheque of \$12,000 from one man in that church. I had not asked for money but the close relationship had made him feel good about the Conference. With satisfaction and nostalgia I think of another congregation which appeared to have lost its reason for existing. After several evenings of goal-setting exercises, that congregation

moved forward with new enthusiasm and still does so today.

Some of my decisions as part-time Executive Secretary for the CR Board were, at best, rather unorthodox. One day in late fall I came to the Flat Rock church in northern British Columbia and found its church building perched precariously on the edge of a newly constructed basement. It looked very hazardous to me and a snowstorm was approaching. When I asked how they could leave the building in such a condition they told me that their contractor had left it that way because they couldn't pay him and had no way of raising additional funds. I telephoned Frank Dyck, our Conference Treasurer, and asked him to loan that church \$2,500 immediately. The CR Board would have to decide later how to handle the details. My prompt decision so impressed a non-Mennonite in that service that he donated an organ and began giving money to the church. My board failed to see the urgency of the situation and rapped my knuckles, but it could not reverse the decision.

Relating to congregations could also result in tensions. One time, after I recommended a pastor for a certain church, many people became unhappy with him. They asked me why I had suggested him. I acknowledged that I had been aware of some of the pastor's problems, but I thought they would be a healing congregation and had not anticipated their severe criticism.

On a number of occasions I tried to help congregations with their ministerial review processes. I did not find the minister evaluation materials from the General Conference office very helpful. The process they suggested was often hurtful to both the minister and the congregation. On one occasion when I was just beginning a congregational evaluation, I detected a spirit of hostility toward me and the Conference. I suggested that I would list all their complaints on a chalk board. Only one issue arose and that had nothing to do with the CMC. It concerned the building of Eden Mental Health Centre in Winkler. After they told me what had hurt them and I informed them that the institution was not part of my responsibility but that I would share their complaint with the appropriate people, they felt free to talk about our Conference. We had a good session.

During my years in office I related to several thousand of our 25,000-plus conference members. By the end of my ten years, I knew thousands of them by name and they had become very dear to me. The relationships with congregations and Conference members were the icing on the cake for me.

Relating to the General Conference

Very unfortunate, yet possibly inevitable, was one of my struggles with General Conference personnel. When I came to the Canadian Conference offices I was still revelling in our success regarding the entry of most local congregations of the Bergthaler Church into the General Conference. I had promoted that fusion with the General Conference at our membership meetings and had written editorials about it in the *Bergthaler Gemeindeblatt*. Just a few months earlier I could not have believed any kind of disharmony could ever develop.

The seed for dispute lay deep in the histories of the two bodies, the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. At the founding meeting of the CMC in 1902 in the garden of Bishop Peter Regier of Tiefengrund, Saskatchewan, J.C. Sprunger of Berne Indiana, the GC representative, helped representatives of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan and the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba lay the foundation for the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. At that meeting it was decided that help be given to build a church in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. Sprunger moved that the monies collected from the congregations of the two participating Canadian church groups for that church be sent to the Home Mission Board of the General Conference. The General Conference then would use the money to pay for the church at Rosthern.

Sprunger's intentions were good. The Home Mission Board of the General Conference at times has spent much more money in Canada than it collected from Canadian congregations. That was especially true during the 1920s and 1930s when the newly arrived immigrants from Russia needed support for their ministers. Many trained ministers were salaried to establish new congregations. During the massive move into the cities after World War II, the General Conference helped the immigrants establish urban congregations. As a result, Canadian church development and growth appeared destined to remain dependent on the General Conference. Many congregational pastors received cheques from three conferences. And many of them felt that support from the GC offices in Newton was the most secure, not knowing that most of it came from Canadian congregations.

That policy was still in place in 1971. Canadian monies were sent to the Newton office and then used in Canada. It frustrated us when the Newton office prepared receipt forms and brought them to be used

in our Winnipeg office for all church and personal donations for Conference causes. When we informed them that we had just reprinted our CMC forms, they suggested we might burn ours. That made us, not the paper, burn!

Granted, those were bureaucratic issues and should have been handled more maturely by both Conferences. However, other issues surfaced. Those who drafted constitutions for both the General and the Canadian Conferences had drawn up too many parallel programs. Both levels had Home Missions, Christian Service and Christian Education programs. The same issues were dealt with at the GC level and the CMC level. When promotion materials for Probe '73, an evangelism initiative, were sent to the congregations they came from Newton, from CMC, from the provincial conferences and from the central Probe '73 office. Our congregations were inundated with materials. Periodic GC-CMC joint staff meetings attempted to alleviate such problems and, at a number of points, were successful.

I remember one meeting which included staff not only from the General Conference and Canadian Conference, but also from the large Mennonite Church. A church growth technocrat had been invited to make a presentation on how to generate more church growth. He suggested a new approach for record keeping in the church, a program which would include both church members and known seekers. All Mennonite Church and General Conference churches in the U.S. and Canada would together have one central computer which would list all church members and known seekers. Regional conferences and congregations would then plug in and have that information at their fingertips. The centrally located computer operator then would keep the church membership files for all of the congregations. To make the system functional all congregations would have access to the central computer through an 800-number. I vigorously opposed the idea. During the early 1970s the concept of central information-keeping was new. I had considerable pastoral experience and looked at church members not in terms of computer files but as live people. I suppose I had good support. The proposal was not accepted.

Nationalism, both Canadian and American, contributed further to the conflict. Although Christians should rise above patriotic nationalism, we were still influenced by the country to which we belonged. It seems that traditionally Americans assume a certain kind of worldview which sets them above the rest. Our good American brothers and sisters could not understand why we resisted the discussion of purely

national issues at the binational General Conference sessions. We had our own arena for discussing Canadian issues in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada; they used the North American arena for theirs. They resisted having a U.S. conference and finally accepted that reality only because we Canadians insisted on it. They couldn't see the need. The tensions were similar in MCC. To this day some devoted American friends do not see the need for an MCC (U.S.) and an MCC (Canada). They simply say, "We have Akron." Much of this sounds unnecessary now. Because of our pressures, many changes have been made. More administrative work has been moved to Canada and Canadian voices are respected more and more. I wish that would have been the case in 1971 when I began working with General Conference personnel on behalf of the Canadian Conference.

The U.S. congregations of the General Conference now have their own caucus prior to the triennial GC sessions. It is a limited practical solution. However, many congregations there are not in agreement with this development. The U.S. caucus has so little actual business that it can all be done in a few hours. More recently, very good work has been done by a joint structures committee and I am sure eventually a good solution will be found and accepted by all concerned.

One positive consequence of the conflicts was that we learned to know each other much better. Although I had frustrations with the structures that related to these two conference bodies, I admired U.S. brothers and sisters for their dedication to Christ and their devotion to their work. I appreciated the friendships that developed during those years. It is my sincere hope that whatever new structure may emerge from the ongoing discussions, Canadians and Americans will continue to work together. Production of educational and worship materials and study conferences on issues of theology, faith and ethics are concerns which transcend the 49th parallel. Facilitating the ongoing ministries in our two countries and into the world at large may call for national conferences under the umbrella of an international body, a General Conference of conferences. Eventually such a structure could include the churches from our so-called mission fields.

Ministry with the Chinese

Out of the tragedy of the Vietnam War came an unexpected new opportunity for the CMC: ministry to refugees from South-East Asia. In the early 1900s the General Conference had begun a outreach

ministry in mainland China. The Henry Browns were our first missionaries. By 1950, the year of the communist take-over in China, that mission had resulted in large congregations, numerous educational and health institutions and mammoth buildings. Then the communists scattered the believers, took control of all institutional facets of the mission and used them for their own propaganda or education. We thought that was the end of the General Conference work with Chinese people and that the outreach had failed.

Our thinking was wrong. Forty years later, the number of Christians in China had increased ten-fold. And thousands of people of Chinese background fled from Vietnam and other countries in South-East Asia and were received by Canada. Through the help of Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite congregations across Canada welcomed and helped settle several thousand of those refugees. The host homes introduced many of them to their churches. Not only were the refugees open to the Gospel but many were active Christians, primarily through the work of the Christian Missionary Alliance. Although they had not been introduced to the Anabaptist understanding of Scriptures before coming to Canada, many found it appealing.

Mennonite church and provincial missions committees became actively involved with this new Chinese ministry. Two leaders in Winnipeg were Rev. Ernest Wiebe of Home Street Mennonite Church and Jim Penner, a missions committee member of Bethel Mennonite Church. However, it quickly became apparent that most refugees only attended our worship services out of a kind of cultural courtesy to their hosts. Those who wanted to relate to Christians, wanted that setting to be Chinese. Thus began the era of establishing Chinese congregations. Larger centres like Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Calgary and Vancouver soon boasted Chinese Mennonite congregations.

The CMC through its Congregational Resources Board worked with provincial and congregational missions committees in a supportive way to give guidance to emerging congregations and to give assistance in planting new ones. As General Secretary for the General Board and as part-time secretary for CR Board, I became actively involved in establishing those congregations. Together with Paul Boschman, at that time pastor of Mountainview Mennonite Church in Vancouver, we established the first congregation in Vancouver with Stephen Lee as pastor. Lee had escaped from mainland China, received a Christian college training in Hong Kong and become an ordained minister in the Christian Missionary Alliance Church. Some difficulties prompted his

decision to leave the Alliance Church and to work with us. A second congregation started in Vancouver under the name Grace Chinese Mennonite with Daniel Cheung as pastor. We helped the Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church get started with Winfred and Jean Soong as pastors. In Calgary Ezekiel Wong started a dual congregation, part Chinese, part Vietnamese. Later the CR Board helped start several more Chinese, Vietnamese and Laotian congregations.

During that time I ordained two Chinese ministers, Ezekiel Wong and Winfred Soong. The ordination of the latter was interesting. Before the service I had suggested where Winfred and his wife, Jean, would sit and stand. Although only Winfred was to be ordained, Jean was to stand beside him. An older Chinese brother came forward and objected because in the Chinese tradition a woman is never equal to her husband. Thus she should not stand beside him but sit behind him or on a lower level. But Winfred wanted his wife with him. She was very important in the Toronto work as a trained writer and in translating and writing Christian literature for their people. When I could not



Officiating at the ordination of Ezekiel and Ruth Wong in Calgary, assisted by representatives from the Alberta Conference and CMC's Congregational Resources Board.

persuade the older Chinese brother I suggested that Jean might sit behind her husband for the act of ordination. After Winfred had been ordained I would ask Jean to stand, step forward, then I would pray also for her and her specific Christian literature ministry. I even placed my hand on her head for the prayer. It worked. The older brother did not protest.

The Conference has experienced its share of difficulties in its work with Chinese ministries. Several factors account for this. All of us involved were novices in cross-cultural ministries. The Chinese were neither Caucasian Mennonites nor North American aboriginal people. They had a unique culture of their own. Secondly, we put all Chinese people into one basket. We soon discovered that even the Chinese from mainland China had their own distinct cultural and language groupings and that Vietnamese Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese were not the same. Ezekiel Wong tried to bridge that gap in Calgary and failed. People from one Chinese group had difficulty accepting direction from a person from a different group. Those differences were even more serious than when a single-minded Molotschna person might try to give advice to an entrenched Chortitza person. Furthermore, the Chinese congregations also had difficulty becoming involved in some of the disputes or issues which were prominent in the larger Conference scene.

My involvement in Chinese ministry was relatively brief but it was challenging and fulfilling. Through it I gained some close friends whom I missed after I left the office. I do regret that our Chinese sisters and brothers appear to be withdrawing from more active participation in conference sessions and, in some cases, have even found it necessary to withdraw from the Conference itself. I trust their encounter with us has been meaningful for them and that our Anabaptist understanding of Scriptures and the faith will continue to be important for them.

Reflections on Conference

Naturally, every General Secretary brings certain unique strengths to the Conference. It seemed mine was to relate to the people and gain the confidence of congregations. I did not meet the needs of all the people, especially those who were more academically minded. That became obvious to me through a letter I should not have read. During my last days in the office my secretary placed my mail on my desk as

she had done hundreds of times before. The letters had been opened and I did not pause to read the addresses on the envelopes. Hence, I had not noticed that one particular letter began with "Dear Larry" instead of "Dear Henry." Nonetheless that correspondent, a good friend, congratulated Larry Kehler for accepting the call and wished him well in setting a more professional direction for the conference. The writer had perceived correctly the lack of another important dimension for our Conference. My two successors, Larry Kehler and Helmut Harder, have richly compensated for my weakness in this and other areas and have guided the Conference very well. I have felt comfortable every time I read their General Board or Conference reports. I pray that the Conference may continue to grow for the edification of its congregations and for its outreach ministries in an extremely needy world.

However, I have continuing concerns regarding its future. The turn-of-the-century, liberal-conservative tensions remain, albeit in different garbs and under different labels. Issues such as divorce of members and ministers, homosexuality, inclusive language and the bi-sexuality of God may yet create many debates, hurts and even withdrawals or divisions. A serious financial squeeze is looming. Our tri-level conferences operate programs, some overlapping, which continue to escalate in costs. The trend toward fundraising which often circumvents congregations and the aging and passing away of the segment of supporters (the *Der Bote* generation) which came through the language transition will affect the ministry of the Conference.

The veteran conference supporters still recall the pre-professional era when most work was done on a voluntary bases. Let me cite one example. In 1971 when I came to the Conference office one of my assignments was to help congregations find ministers for their pulpits. It was easier then because many congregations were still calling ministers out of their membership or were relying on lay ministry leadership. Then came the time when our Conference made the placement office more visible by assigning it to the CR Board. Soon provincial conferences took up the same task. Today both levels of conference have placement people. In two decades the salaries for conference and church workers have more than doubled. No one would oppose paying salaries to conference-church workers. Certainly, salaried ministers cannot stay indefinitely in the same congregation as did their lay predecessors. But now we are adding second and third ministers. All this is happening when the country is in an economic

recession. How long will our supporters be able to carry the load? One of the great challenges of our day may not necessarily be to find more money through more efficient fundraising techniques, but to rediscover voluntarism in congregational preaching and teaching ministries.

Another area of concern is the mushrooming cost of our annual sessions. I still remember when conferences were held in tents and meals were locally prepared. Then we moved to school auditoriums, larger church centres and university facilities. At first the inviting congregations were responsible for expenses. Then the trend developed that registration fees and special offerings covered the costs. But as the annual convention became more expensive, the delegate count at the sessions decreased, consequently fewer people made the decisions. I hope the mini-session at Normal, Illinois, in 1989 and at Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in 1992 will tell us that conventions are not only held to have program presentations but for the meeting of congregations and people. These two conferences held outside Canada were aberrations that should not be repeated. In the past, the sessions have been encounters with hosting communities. In Normal and Sioux Falls they were encounters with facilities.

My experience with the Conference of Mennonites of Canada during the decade 1971-1981 has enriched me in many areas. We are a diverse people. We came to Canada from Russia during three major migrations: 1870s, 1920s, 1950s and smaller groups in between those larger movements. We came from East and West Prussia. More recently we have begun the merger process with Swiss descendants within the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada. And we came from the rank and file of the ordinary Canadian populations, from its aboriginal inhabitants and from the Far East, Africa and Spanish America.

I still miss the warmth of the people in Altona and community. It seems that healthier retirement for a minister is among the people with whom he has ministered and who ministered to him and his family. However, I thoroughly treasured the decade with the Conference. I consider myself fortunate that thousands of people from British Columbia to Atlantic Canada and all over the United States became dear to me. That has made my involvement very worthwhile. That is why I praise God from whom such blessings flow.

April 11, 1979

David P. Neufeld, Chairman
Conference of Mennonites in Canada
2093 Topaz St.
Clearbrook, B.C. V2T 3W7

Fred Enns, Chairman
Congregational Resources Board
8320 - 117 St.
Edmonton, Alta. T6G 1R3

Brethren,

I accepted an invitation to become Executive Secretary of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in the spring of 1971. I began my work at the July Conference sessions in Vancouver. In 1974 I accepted a second three-year term and in 1977 a third term. In 1977 I really expected to serve only a year or at the most two years. Due to two executive staff, Frank Dyck and Isaac Froese, resignations coming in 1977 I did not think it good for the Conference if I quit at the same time. Now, I believe it is time that I inform you that I believe it is good for me and for the Conference that I tender my resignation.

You are aware that the relationship discussions with General Conference have taken much energy and time. The developments are quite positive from my perspective but this view is not shared by everyone. With the rapid expansion of the Provincial Conferences' ministries, totally new approaches will need to be discovered in the work in Canada.

You are aware that mission outreach potential has mushroomed in the last decade. There is our involvement with Germany, with the Chinese and on the horizon is involvement with Asiatic Indians and French. MCC has been involved in the Atlantic provinces for 25 to 30 years. Unofficially I have been in discussion with MCC about making tangible this involvement through church planting. MCC is now inviting further discussion regarding this.

I believe it is time that the Conference gets new leadership with new vision, fresh vitality and different skills. There must be the freedom to move into new areas but also, if necessary, wind down total programs and change directions and positions. There is a very challenging decade ahead that beckons aggressive leadership.

On the personal or more selfish side, I believe I cannot wait any longer if I still want to do something else before retirement. I will be 64 this December.

I am giving notice to you to give you the freedom if you so wish to find a successor. At the present time I do not have any specific plans. My termination date is therefore negotiable but I believe should come within six months and not later than at Council of Boards, 1980.

I am happy that the Conference has given me the opportunity to serve.

With peace and love,

H. J. Gerbrandt
General Secretary

17

Ministry with Umsiedler^{*}

In our Mennonite history books stories abound on the heroics in our migration experiences. Every migration had its special persons or institutions which were recognized as having made major contributions in initiating the migration or in leading it to its successful completion. The move from Prussia to Russia during the 1700s gave us the legendary delegates Bartsch and Hoepfner. The 1870s migrations from Russia to Canada presented to us Jacob Y. Shantz and Wilhelm Hespeler, the brothers Gerhard and Heinrich Wiebe and Johann Wiebe and the Ontario (Old) Mennonite Church. The 1920s migration made the Canadian Board of Colonization, Peter P. Epp and David Toews famous. The movement to Canada in the 1940s and 1950s had that same board plus MCC in Europe with C. F. Klassen and Peter and Elfrieda Dyck.

The massive movement of Mennonites from the Soviet Union to the West during the decades of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s is no different. Here the hero is a German Mennonite, Hans von Niessen; his supporting body is the European *Internationale Mennonitische Organisation* (IMO). Mennonite Central Committee of North America has given financial and personnel support. However, this movement is different in that the vast majority are leaving Russia for Germany and not Canada. It is unique in that it is by far the largest of all Mennonite

* During the time I worked with these German Mennonites from Russia who had resettled in Germany, the commonly used name for them was *Umsiedler*. More recently this has changed. At this point they prefer to be called *Aussiedler*. However, I will continue to use the earlier term.

movements in history. Hans von Niessen estimates that by now more than 100,000 people of Russian Mennonite background have settled in Germany.

The traditional Russian Mennonite emigrants consistently had set their sights on Canada or the United States. More recently, the doors to those countries were not as open as they had been. More importantly, the migrants were different. Something had reset their vision. During the two World Wars, 1914-18 and 1939-45, the Mennonites learned to admire the discipline of the German military forces which occupied Ukraine. During those short periods of occupation, law and order were brought back to the villages; private schools and churches were opened. Mennonites thought they breathed a new air of freedom. They discovered an inexplicable affinity to their regimented rulers and they liked it. But that acceptance of a rigid German mind-set was not accidental. It had not developed overnight. A century of preparation had preceded the change.

During that long period of communist rule when Mennonites suffered indescribably, the ties between Mennonites and Germany became much stronger. The propensity for things German was partly rooted in the reform movements which had swept through the Mennonite colonies in Ukraine during the 19th and early 20th century. Ministers, evangelists and educators from Germany had influenced Mennonite thinking profoundly. Subsequently, leaders from their colonies studied in German or Swiss seminaries, universities and business institutions. And without fail, during their time of suffering, Mennonites had repeatedly been labelled Germans or fascist by their tormentors. That designation, though derisively given, they had accepted.

The actions of an immigrant woman in Wolfsburg illustrated this devotion to Germany. She had been imprisoned by the Soviets. Accompanied on her guitar she sang *Deutsche Heimatlieder* (German folk songs). The guards repeatedly forbade her to do so. When she persisted, they took away her guitar and forced her to sleep in a bed so badly infested with lice that the straw literally moved. She continued singing her *Heimatlieder*. Finally they released her, claiming she was hopelessly insane. Her devotion to everything German was typical of the majority. After years of suffering at the hands of the communists, everything Russian had become bad and everything German was considered good. Some even asserted they had pure Aryan blood in their veins.

The mass movement to West Germany began when Chancellor Willy Brandt travelled to Moscow in the early 1970s to negotiate some kind of release for German citizens residing in the Soviet Union. Included were the thousands of Mennonites and German colonists who had managed to come to the West during the German occupation of their homeland or had been part of the mass movement of Soviet people to Germany when the German army retreated. All had obtained German passports. Finally, almost anyone who could lay claim to being German qualified for German citizenship. A cynical joke circulated in Germany while we were there: "If, with the help of a witness, you can prove that your grandmother owned a German Shepherd dog, then you can lay claim to being German and ask for a visa to Germany."

The treaty which Willy Brandt negotiated with the communist regime in the U.S.S.R. required that the Soviet government be paid a certain amount of money for each person released. In Germany the returnees (*Umsiedler*) were reimbursed for lost farmland and property, lost wages and lost pension insurance. Furthermore, they were compensated for earlier suffering in forced situations, like labour camps or prisons. They were supported during language study and seniors were given pensions immediately. Jobs were more readily available to them than to resident Germans. No-interest or low-interest loans were made available. Soon settlements sprang up that boasted row upon row of expensive new houses, the envy of older German residents. Perhaps never before had refugees been helped so liberally and envied so intensely.

The acceptance and resettlement of these Mennonite refugees remained a German issue under the leadership of Hans von Niessen and the IMO organization. MCC supplied some funds for church buildings and voluntary personnel for some of the receiving camps. Parallel developments took place in Lutheran and Catholic church traditions with leaders giving similar assistance to their people as von Niessen gave to the Mennonites.

It must be recognized that, when these people are spoken of as Mennonites, the term is being used somewhat loosely. More than half of the people who were classified as Mennonite had become Baptist during the years of turmoil in the U.S.S.R. In the post-World War II period it was easier to be a Baptist and under the umbrella of leaders who were Russian. The Mennonite Brethren identified more readily with the Baptists, many not being able to distinguish whether they were Baptist or Mennonite. Many Mennonites had intermarried with Rus-

sians and during the communist years had lost much of their faith and ethnic culture. It might be more correct to use the word Mennonite for those believers who were neither Catholic nor Lutheran. All became the responsibility of von Niessen in their resettlement.

The Conference of Mennonites in Canada officially became involved with *Umsiedler* during the mid 1970s, primarily to assist with the spiritual dimension of resettlement. A leading CMC spokesman for the immigrants was Siegfried Bartel, a Mennonite formerly from Prussia. At the 1975 CMC annual sessions in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, he presented a resolution which called for our involvement. Bartel, a member of Mennonite Central Committee Canada, together with John Wieler, an employee of MCC, had attended an IMO meeting in Holland where the *Umsiedler* issue was discussed. The Europeans acknowledged that the migration issue had become too big and too involved to be handled by any one person or organization. In fact, the only person employed by IMO at the time was Volker Horsch, a South German Mennonite who appeared to have little entree to those Low German-Russian-speaking pietists, and possibly also lacked the organizational skills to develop a plan of action. At that meeting Bartel discerned that the Conference of Mennonites in Canada was the logical group to be involved. They were our people, our cousins who spoke our language and whose evangelical faith traditions ran parallel to ours. Bartel was also aware that numerous appeals had been made by the *Umsiedler* to members of his congregation, Eden Mennonite Church in Chilliwack, and to numerous other congregations across Canada.

He placed before the CMC delegates in Swift Current the urgent need for Canadian Mennonite involvement. He claimed the German Mennonite church was out of touch with those pietist-oriented people who were just emerging out of their milieu of persecution. Furthermore, the ancestors of the new immigrants had left Prussia several centuries earlier and their Low German language had undergone many changes in that period. The Canadian Mennonite Low German was much closer to that of the *Umsiedler*.

The Bartel recommendation was discussed and accepted by the delegate body. It was the beginning of long and complicated inter-agency, inter-personal and inter-continental negotiations and struggles. No one could have envisioned when we made that decision in the Swift Current sports' facility that the next three years would be so confusing and difficult. During that whole time of finding our direction

there were strong opponents to our involvement. The sports' facility in which we met was destroyed by a tornado a few days after our sessions. A very different tornado threatened to test relationships and upset long-standing traditions.

As General Secretary it became my responsibility to make the initial overtures on behalf of the General Board. That was more difficult than we originally had anticipated. There seemed to be no one in West Germany whom we could contact or who felt authorized to invite us to make our first personal connections. Even more seriously, there appeared to be no one who was officially responsible for work with the *Umsiedler*. Mennonite Central Committee in Akron was not overly enthused about having the Conference of Mennonites in Canada become involved in the work in Germany. It took us a long time before we fully became aware of their resistance and longer yet to accept that reality and work around it.

Ever since World War II when MCC helped with the reconstruction of Germany, it had seen itself as the inter-Mennonite body responsible for Europe. Peter J. Dyck, who had been so involved there immediately after the war, seemed to feel that MCC should remain the primary structure for European work. But MCC was primarily a relief agency. It had become tradition that it did not do pastoral work nor enter into church planting situations. When a spiritual or ecclesiastical ministry was needed, MCC would invite in one of the participating Mennonite conferences. In view of the fact that the Mennonite Brethren had been invited to enter Europe immediately after World War II, Dyck seemed to feel that they should continue to be responsible for the spiritual side of the ministry now. However, our unofficial contacts from Europe indicated that, while the Mennonite Brethren were very active in ministering to their own members, the so-called *kirchliche* Mennonites (the Mennonite grouping in Russia from which the Mennonite Brethren divided and who, when they came to Canada, joined the General Conference and Conference of Mennonites in Canada) were asking for our support. Behind that desire lay decades of ecclesiastical tension and struggle.

During the decades of suffering in the U.S.S.R., the Mennonite Brethren and the Baptists had moved into one orbit. Baptism by immersion and a more vibrant, vocal expression of faith provided the glue which drew them together. The *kirchliche* Mennonites were excluded from that restricted church life which the Soviets permitted. In numerous instances the exclusion had become rather concrete. One

man told us he had provided his home as a worship centre for the MB-Baptist-controlled group for many years, yet consistently had been denied access to the communion table. When they came to the free West, the *kirchliche* Mennonites wanted to be in control of their own church affairs. An IMO agency, under heavy MB influence, was not the avenue for this to happen. An impasse had developed and we had to find a way to deal with it.

Thus, the negotiations regarding the work in Germany were complicated and sensitive. Peter J. Dyck had invited Siegfried Bartel to attend the IMO meeting in Holland which had led to his recommendation to the Canadian Conference. Apparently, Dyck had said at that meeting that the MBs and the (Old) Mennonite mission boards entered Germany after World War II but the GCs had indicated they wanted to work only through MCC. During one of my discussions I shared that comment with J. J. Thiessen who had been involved with spiritual ministries in Europe after the war. Thiessen claimed he had tried hard at that time to have GC involvement but Peter Dyck, MCC director for Europe, had spoken decisively on behalf of the General Conference and said, "The GCs prefer to work through MCC."

In keeping with his view that the General Conference should work through MCC, early in 1974 Peter Dyck asked Heinz Janzen, General Secretary of the General Conference, for names of Mennonite ministers who might take over the ministry in the Neuwied Mennonite Church where Hans von Niessen had been pastor. The church had been founded primarily by Prussian and German Mennonites, but now was experiencing a large influx of *Umsiedler* members. Janzen referred that task to me. I submitted the names of Rudy Goerzen, J. F. Pauls, H. P. Epp and Peter J. Froese. Dyck selected Froese. That freed Hans von Niessen exclusively for his IMO work. Von Niessen had come to Germany from the U.S.S.R. toward the end of World War II. He had escaped evacuation back to Russia by going to Paraguay. There he managed to get his education and become a minister and school teacher. He returned to Germany for further training and was called to the Neuwied Evangelical Mennonite Church.

After Heinz Janzen had become involved with finding a minister for Neuwied, his appetite was whetted enough to make an exploratory trip to Germany on his own. He found wide acceptance, consequently recommended that the General Conference become officially involved with *Umsiedler* work. He wrote his findings and decision to Peter Dyck. Dyck cautioned him with the words, "Let us not run ahead."

Heinz then wrote me a letter and recommended that the Canadian Conference take over European ministries on behalf of the General Conference. The manoeuvring back and forth naturally slowed us down. By October 1975 Siegfried Bartel chided me for not getting our Conference on track and becoming more involved. He urged me to proceed more quickly. He questioned Peter Dyck's stalling tactics in preventing CMC from moving forward.

The CMC European Ministries Committee—Jake Harms, Siegfried Bartel and I—then went to our 1976 conference sessions in B.C. to ask for further counsel. Through the Resolutions Committee our recommendation ended with the following, “. . . that we send two representatives to Germany to relate to the *Umsiedler*, fellowship with them and, in consultation with MCC, determine what manner of needs exist and recommend appropriate action.” A diversionary or stalling amendment was moved, suggesting that we “establish a formal relationship through existing channels.” We had tried to do that but thus far we had failed. The amendment was defeated. Heinz Janzen then spoke on behalf of the General Conference for the original motion. Siegfried Bartel again spoke for direct contact with the *Umsiedler* of the kind the Mennonite Brethren had. The motion without amendment carried with a strong majority.

Dynamics in Germany also made it difficult to know who from there was the most appropriate person to contact us. Hans von Niessen was now an employee of IMO, Europe's inter-Mennonite relief agency. It was awkward for him to invite one particular conference to become involved. He finally referred the matter to Dr. Gerhard Hildebrandt, chairman of the *Vereinigung der deutschen Mennonitengemeinden* (Conference of North German Mennonite Churches), and to Dr. Helmut Greve, chairman of IMO. We received our first official invitation from those two men.

All preliminary work was completed by February 1977 when Jake and Anne Harms and Susan and I went on a three-week exploratory trip to Germany. Our wives travelled on their own expense, yet proved very essential for our contacts. Hans von Niessen spent two weeks taking us to various groups across Germany. We were given wide acceptance with many invitations and very encouraging fellowship. What pained us most was the realization that we were several years too late. To illustrate, we met a family clan in Hanover who begged us to begin a church immediately. A year later they had all gone to a German Evangelical Free Church. That was not an isolated case.



The first official meeting in Germany to explore work with Umsiedler (from left): Hans and Anna-Marie Plett, pastor at Bechterdissen, later chairman of the Umsiedler Committee; Jake and Anne Harms, chairman of CMC European Ministries Committee; Johann and Mrs. Redekop, minister in Bechterdissen; Bernhard and Mrs. Harder, leading minister of the emerging Bielefeld congregation; Susan and I.

Following our exploratory trip, more preparation was needed on both sides of the Atlantic. Neither we nor they had a plan of action. It had been impossible to coordinate planning in Germany because no one appeared to be in charge. After our contact with several German Mennonite pastors we began our work. Our first worker in Europe was Jake Tiltzky from British Columbia. He went in response to an invitation from Albert Bartel, a Prussian Mennonite leader and bishop of the Espelkamp congregation, to conduct a ministers' course and to preach in different groups.

We then made Tiltzky available for foundational work in Wolfsburg, a community which had been drawn to the attention of Dr. Gerhard Hildebrandt by Hermann Neudorf of Braunschweig. Neudorf, an industrialist from Russia, had come to Braunschweig after World War I. He became keenly interested in the Mennonite migrants who came to Wolfsburg, a major industrial centre and home of the Volkswagen plant. Tiltzky baptized a number of people and helped them organize a church. We also began to prepare Erwin and Hildur Cornelsen of Vancouver to pastor the new group in Wolfsburg. Until the Cornelsens were able to go, we sent Heinrich and Liese Dueck of Chilliwack as transition workers.

At the 1978 CMC Council of Boards sessions, the European Ministries Committee reported on the progress of the *Umsiedler* work. Plans for Wolfsburg were in place. Literature would be made available for the *Umsiedler* congregations. Another worker could be sent later in 1978. Funds were in place for training workers in Germany. We also suggested that CMC provide \$25,000 to MCC for church building. A significant discussion item was our projected policy regarding our work in Germany. We proposed that CMC continue its practice of sending workers only in response to specific invitations. All administration should remain in Europe. Finally, the European Ministries Committee recommended that I make a second trip to Germany to discuss those proposals with the people responsible in Germany. The hitch in all this was that thus far we had not found those responsible people in Germany. The recommendations were fully accepted by our General Board and Council of Boards and prepared for presentation to our annual conference sessions in July.

On February 8 I wrote a comprehensive letter to Hans von Niessen informing him of our proposals to Council of Boards and that they would be presented to conference delegates in July. Upon receiving my letter von Niessen invited all leading ministers of congregations with a sizable *Umsiedler* membership to meet in the home of Hans Plett, Elder of the Bechterdissen Church. At that meeting on March 14, 1978, the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft zur geistlichen Unterstutzung in Mennonitengemeinden* (working union for the spiritual support of Mennonite churches) was officially born. Plett became chairman of the organization.

From that moment all our official business was conducted with and through him. Over the years that has been a very good experience. It became my difficult task to report in detail to Peter J. Dyck regarding those developments when he was in Winnipeg on MCC work. He was disappointed that the responsibility for spiritual ministry to the *kirchliche Umsiedler* had now been assumed by another body and that our CMC decision had been largely responsible for that.

Since 1977 many Canadians served the *Umsiedler* people: Jake and Erna Tilitzky, ministers' courses, choir work and organizational work in Wolfsburg; Heinrich and Liese Dueck, pastoral ministry in Wolfsburg; their grandson Kenneth Dueck, youth and choir work in Wolfsburg and in other groups; Erwin and Hildur Cornelsen, pastoral work in Wolfsburg and numerous other ministries in various congregations; Jacob and Justina Reimer, pastors in Hanover; Henry P. and Hilda Epp,



Worship centre in Wolfsburg (Free Church Lutheran) before our building was ready.



The 5-day Christmas retreat in Roedinhausen in 1983 where I team-taught the group.



Susan, Helena Born and Margaretha Wiebe prepare for the sewing group in our home, 1983.



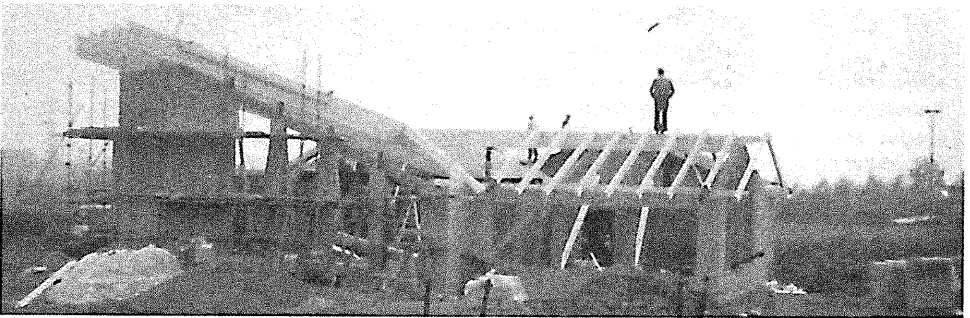
The youth group in Wolfsburg.



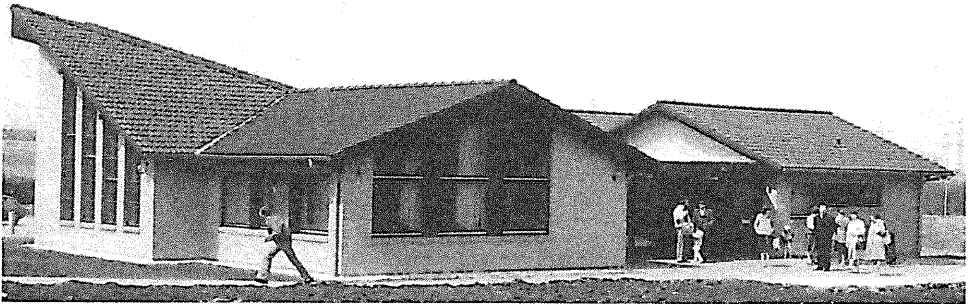
Susan's Sunday school class (Kinderstunde) in Wolfsburg.



Ground breaking service for the new church building in Wolfsburg in 1983.



Construction of the Wolfsburg church building.



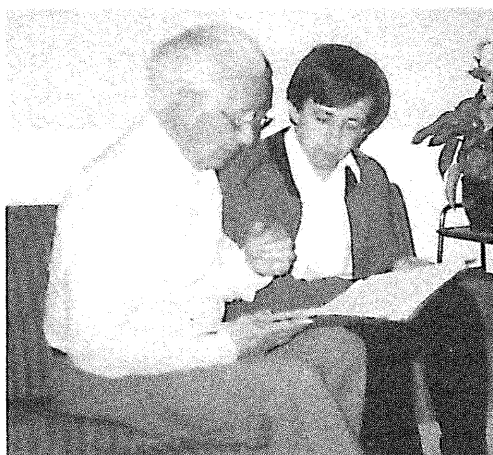
The new church facility, ready for occupancy in July 1984.



The 1984 catechism and baptism class (front row) in the Wolfsburg congregation.



Installation of workers in the Wolfsburg congregation: Daniel and Maria Janzen as church leader and pastor; Johann and Helena Rehan as music director and yourh worker. Both Umsiedler couples came on invitation from the Bachnang congregation in southern Germany.



Orienting my successor, Daniel Janzen, to ministry in the Wolfsburg congregation.



Wolfsburg bids us farewell after two years of ministry in the congregation.

Bible teaching and ministers' courses in the Bechterdissen area; Edward and Elizabeth Enns, Bible teaching, training courses and personal ministries in Bechterdissen and various other congregations; Ernest and Irene Enns, choir work in all the *kirchliche Umsiedler* churches; George Schmidt, Waldemar Janzen, David Schroeder, all teaching in short-term Bible courses; Peter and Margaret Harms, evangelistic work in all our nine congregations; George and Esther Wiebe, music courses and choir work in various settings. Susan and I spent two years pastoring the congregation in Wolfsburg and working in ministerial training and youth ministry in various congregations across Germany.

In each case these workers served in response to an invitation. When a request for additional workers came, I would present possible names and the committee in Germany would invite them. To our knowledge all the workers presented themselves well and performed positive ministries. But gradually the situation changed. Our Canadian presence was no longer as favourably accepted as when Jake and Anne Harms and Susan and I made our first trip in 1977.

The *Umsiedler* people had come out of the fiery furnace of persecution and various pietistic revival movements. To some of their leaders we Canadians were not sensitive enough and not "spiritual" enough. Through our German periodical, *Der Bote*, they discovered that Canadian Mennonite church life reflected much Canadian culture. They heard that women played a major role in worship settings in some of our congregations. They also discovered that divorce had crept into the church and appeared to be tolerated; that our women had short hair and did not wear head coverings; and Canadians traditionally did not stand while praying.

As the massive migrations continued during the latter 1980s, many new ministers came from Russia into the German congregations. Those ministers who had collaborated with us were eclipsed by more pietistic ones who were less open to working with the Canadian Conference. By the end of 1985 we discovered that our ministry had reached a climax and that our contact person, Hans Plett, could no longer send invitations. He was overshadowed and finally replaced by later arrivals from the U.S.S.R.

Although our relationship to the German *Umsiedler* churches still is that they are the inviting body, we the responding body, we are in a period of readjustment and reflection. We may continue to relate to them but in a less active way. Our future relationship to them will depend largely on what the *Umsiedler* young people will do as they

integrate further into the German culture. We already see many changes in their lifestyle.

Peter J. Dyck, who helped thousands of Russian Mennonites find new homes after the defeat of Germany, now is retired in Akron, Pennsylvania. He still remains very interested. Peter and Elfrieda's book, *Up from the Rubble*, details their ministry and serves as a transition to later developments. During Peter's post-World War II years in Germany, he helped with the establishment of the European Bible School, in Bienenberg, Switzerland; he pioneered IMO, the European relief agency; he helped develop *Das Gemeinsame Gremium*, an organization which brings all European relief, peace and mission groups under one umbrella; and he was an inspiration in the development of several congregations after the war. It is understandable that Dyck was not very excited when a new era dawned and MCC was no longer the only North American agency working in Europe. New needs had developed and ministries were required in church planting and worker retraining. Peter J. Dyck's true stature as a dedicated Kingdom builder has been well demonstrated in that he gives this new ministry his wholehearted support.

18

Retirement

I began my work with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in 1971, keenly aware of the many demands facing me. I was 55 at the time and, to my knowledge, in good physical condition. Our children were beginning or preparing for careers of their own. Soon after settling in Winnipeg Susan began to check out possibilities on her own and, through an interesting turn of events, got started with Winnipeg Family Services. Her studies at Elim Bible School and Missionary Medical Institute, her experiences during our pastoral work in Altona, her courses at the University of Winnipeg and Red River Community College, and lots of personal initiative and hard work all played a role as she became involved in exceedingly challenging and satisfying social ventures. The next ten years were busy and fulfilling. Neither of us did any projecting about our own retirement. Under the stress of very busy new schedules we hardly discussed what we would do as it mercilessly zeroed in on us and that fateful age 65 drew near.

Years earlier in Altona I had maintained that aging church workers should not burden the church by continuing indefinitely in leadership positions. What I had not considered was how fast that 65 would suddenly knock on my own door. About 18 months before my 65th birthday I wrote David P. Neufeld, General Board chairman, and shared my decision to terminate my work with the Conference to allow me time to get back into a pastoral situation. Susan and I thought it would be good to retire in a church setting. First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg had invited me to enter into exploratory discussions with them. Neufeld requested that I stay on another two years. I consented. Thus I finished my work with the Canadian Conference in late summer

1981, ten years after beginning and a few months short of my 66th birthday.

Conference officials, especially the new General Secretary, Larry Kehler, made a big splash of my retirement at the 1981 annual sessions in Vancouver. I felt good that my retirement letter had preceded the actual termination by about two years. At least now the festivity did not have to be a camouflaged ploy to nudge me out of my office. Unknown to me, our whole family had been invited. As a farewell gift, I received a beautiful engraved silver tray and a party with friends and family. Unexpectedly the General Board gave me the designation "General Secretary Emeritus." That was it. I was a free person with no visible assignments beyond the next few months in which I had to finish off Conference business. Neither Susan nor I could have anticipated that the next decade would be filled with activities and excitement that would be no less challenging than the two decades in Altona and the decade with the Conference.

During my last months with the Conference, Susan and I received an interesting invitation from Dr. Henry Poettcker, then president of Mennonite Biblical Seminary, to spend a term as guests of the Seminary. Thus, the first months of our retirement were spent in Elkhart, Indiana. In a sense we were ordinary students, taking as many class sessions as possible. But our role as Minister-in-Residence encouraged extensive contact and discussion with students as well as some more formal responsibilities. We participated in various student forums and faculty discussions. Several times I was asked to make special presentations and I conducted one chapel.

The winter term of 1982 was a crucial time for the Seminary. That was the time when feminists were pushing hard from many quarters. One week was totally devoted to workshops and presentations on feminism. I was asked to present a paper in which I emphasized mutual recognition, understanding and cooperation. In the mood of the time that was a whimper in the dark. I was not heard, especially not by several extremists who boycotted every presentation except from their own group. They even refused to hear a woman speaker who was holding down an important executive position in one of the (Old) Mennonite Church agencies.

That was also the time when homosexuals were beginning to come out of the closet. They received permission to have some kind of symposium on campus. There were no known practising homosexuals in the student body, although there were some strong sympathizers.

For us it was very enlightening, yet discouragingly depressing. Susan and I could accept, though not understand, speakers whose orientation was homosexual, but we could not understand those who claimed that God had made them with that orientation. We had great difficulty with those who lived in homosexual “marriages,” but found totally disgusting those who called themselves bisexual. One woman claimed she had first been in a homosexual union, then had spent some years in a heterosexual marriage and was back in a homosexual arrangement. At the time she was contemplating another change. She justified herself by claiming her sexual orientation was always changing. To us she was simply a promiscuous woman and should not have been allowed to speak at the symposium. No heterosexual minister who changed spouses at random would have been permitted to speak from the chapel pulpit at Seminary.

One of my challenging class experiences was with Roelf Kuitse and his research into mission outreach. That class introduced us to Latin American liberation theology. Reading Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* and the writings of Adam Smith helped us understand some of the struggles in third-world countries. A closer look at our North American aboriginal people who were turning to ancestral Native spirituality took on a new meaning as we looked at it in light of their forced conversion to the Christian faith. Revelations regarding physical abuse in Indian boarding schools also helped us appreciate why so many Native people, at least temporarily, have rejected Christianity. It helped us look in a new way at the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’ final appeal, “Be my witnesses.”

During our months at Seminary a second phase of retirement began to take shape. While I was in the CMC office, I had administered the Canadian dimension of our *Umsiedler* ministry. Now it was in the hands of my very competent successor, Larry Kehler. However, I was still on the European Ministries Committee. Susan and I were asked to respond to an invitation from Hans Plett, on behalf of the European committee responsible for *Umsiedler* work, to come to Germany. We were invited to take over the work at Wolfsburg. Erwin and Hildur Cornelsen were returning home to Vancouver after serving there for four years.

In August 1982 we left for Germany. We had mixed feelings on that trip across the Atlantic. Until then I had travelled to Germany as an administrator. Now we were to do the actual work. I believe we were as apprehensive as we had been when we went to Mexico, or to Altona

for Bible school teaching and pastoral work, or to Winnipeg to begin Conference administration work and social work. Now we would have to demonstrate that we still could do congregational work, and that in a different culture. We had to put our hand to the plough and produce.

Our entry into the Wolfsburg setting was not without its difficulties. The Cornelsens had worked hard with a group of children who by that time had entered their teen years. Those young people had experienced many hardships on the journey which eventually led them to Wolfsburg. For four years Erwin and Hildur had provided them with love, guidance and security. For four years they had been treated as children in a Christian atmosphere. They had received something not present in their secular homes which had not yet shaken free from the communist influence.

Our first encounter with that group of teenagers came at the Cornelsen's farewell and our acceptance service. The program was typically *Umsiedler* in format and length. Numerous ministers from the different immigrant congregations spoke and thanked the Cornelsens. We felt somewhat bemused when the leader of the local congregation announced the farewell hymn for the Cornelsens. It was a song that is usually used for an evangelistic appeal, "Musz ich gehn mit leeren Händen?" (Must I go empty-handed?) After the service the youth rushed out of the church and began to cry. Finally Erwin and Hildur joined them. When we came closer the heart-breaking weeping only increased. It was very obvious that those young people were not welcoming us.

Our work in Germany might be divided into five areas of ministry, with three of them focused on the Wolfsburg church. First, there was work with children and youth; secondly, regular Bible study and Sunday morning preaching; thirdly, the planning and construction of the church building; fourthly, various short courses on behalf of the *Umsiedler* Committee; fifthly, our contact with the German Mennonite Church.

The congregation we encountered in Wolfsburg in 1982 was young in its existence yet old in its components. There were only two families. One family consisted of the mother, age 52, her hen-pecked husband who claimed to be an unbeliever, and their children, one pre-school boy and two teenagers. Another couple had a fourteen-year-old daughter. The other church members were grandparents, mostly widowed. One pre-school boy and several pre-school girls were brought by their grandparents for certain functions.

Susan focused on the small children and carried on with the *Kinderstunde* (children's hour) in the tradition begun by Hildur. She tried hard to find more children. That was difficult. Some older people in the church had a deep faith stemming from former, more tranquil Mennonite village life, but their children had been fully indoctrinated by their years of communist training. As a result the parents did not bring their children or even prevented them from coming. Susan won that struggle only partially. Attendance at ongoing functions remained sporadic. She was more successful in rallying small children for special events like Christmas or Easter. In spite of parental resistance, several small girls who were brought by their grandparents are now active in the Wolfsburg youth program. The girls' parents, typical of their age, still maintained their agnostic distance but permitted the children to make their own choice regarding faith in Christ.

The most challenging dimension of our work in Wolfsburg was that bunch of children called youth, who had demonstrated rather obviously that they did not want us there. Ranging in age from 13 to 17, those young people came mostly from inactive Lutheran and Catholic parents who had given up on religion while still in the U.S.S.R. They had been brought in through *Kinderstunde* and were now the older group, namely our youth.

After the Cornelsens left for Canada we made a serious attempt to communicate with that group of young people. We organized a picnic. Unfortunately we miscommunicated and they understood us to be proposing a walk. We went to a lake. Susan had prepared a delicious lunch for the noon meal. When we got there they went off in small groups and intentionally ignored our well planned game activities. Susan and I were left stranded by ourselves. Some wouldn't even sit down to eat with us. That evening we were rather depressed. We knew they blamed us for taking away the Cornelsens.

The journey to win those teenagers was rather long and difficult. But gradually they warmed up to us. I carried on with catechism instruction begun by Erwin Cornelsen. Friday evenings were set aside for the youth. Our regular meeting time was from six to eight, but usually a few young people would come before supper and stay for the full evening. Those youth evenings were most difficult yet highly rewarding exercises. We had some singing, games and visiting and always freshly baked goodies and various drinks. Our kitchen was very tiny, with room for only one person. But two, three and more girls would crowd around Susan and watch her cook or bake. Those were

precious times for intimate discussions about personal matters. Later when the gap between us had been bridged sufficiently, we often sat together and laughed about our unfortunate first encounter.

At the core of every youth night were about 30 to 45 minutes of solid Bible teaching. Very often the young people would challenge my views or positions. They came out of agnostic situations. The only schooling they had in the U.S.S.R. was atheistic. Quite often their response was, "I don't believe that." Our group grew in numbers and in maturity. During our second year, Ken Dueck helped us with the youth work. His strength was music. By the end of that year, five young people and one adult were baptized. Two youth were baptized in the Lutheran Church because of parental pressure, but then they transferred back into our church. Several others who came from Lutheran homes also joined the church.

The spiritual and emotional growth of those young people was demonstrated by their participation in the church's farewell for us. Unknown to us they had prepared a skit which caricatured Susan and me in our ministry to them. They demonstrated how Susan had cooked and baked in her small kitchen, how I carried my Bible and how I taught them. They demonstrated how badly they had behaved and how often it had been necessary to reprimand them to sit still. In the end they all came forward, brought us a rose and kissed us. All that happened on the platform of the church where the pulpit usually stood. An *Umsiedler* minister from another congregation later said it was unbelievable how those young people had accepted us and become devoted to us. He was surprised by what they had done in church but he thoroughly enjoyed it. That group is now the core of the Wolfsburg congregation. Most have married fellows of Lutheran background who also are part of the Wolfsburg Mennonite Church today.

Our youth work also extended beyond Wolfsburg and included summer camps at the Rödinghausen Retreat Centre. There we had more systematic Bible teaching by both Susan and me, nature hikes, singing, endless discussions and lots of food. Involuntarily we became known as youth workers and had the honour of being invited to be resource people for the North German youth when we were back in Germany in 1985-86.

A basic dimension of my work was preaching on Sunday mornings where my main focus was on Bible exposition. Midweek Bible study was an important part of the schedule. Preaching also took us to eight other congregations made up primarily of *Umsiedler* members. During

the course of the two years I also taught courses for ministers, Sunday School teachers and deacons. Those week-long or weekend teaching ministries were well accepted during our two years. However, when new arrivals from the U.S.S.R. began to question our Canadian influence and when conservative ministers still in the U.S.S.R. warned people to distance themselves from Canadian workers, that work became less effective.

Among the objections which the more conservative ministers raised was their fear of salaried ministers. Traditionally, Mennonites had the non-salaried lay minister who did not preach systematic sermons from a prepared outline. I once preached, without preparation, in a large congregation of Lutheran *Umsiedler*. In my mind I divided my text, Hebrews 10:10-25, into four parts, each with a subheading: Let us draw near to God; Let us hold unswervingly to the hope; Let us consider how we may spur one another on; Let us not give up meeting together. The leader of that assembly labelled my presentation a theological discourse and not a sermon. They also feared what was happening in Canadian churches regarding divorce, women in ministry and outreach activities. They were afraid that, through outreach efforts, their testimony would be diluted and they would lose out under the pressure of German culture. They also reacted when they heard that worshippers in our Canadian congregations often sat while they prayed. While in Germany, one Canadian minister had even prayed with his hands behind his back.

An important dimension of our work was construction of the church building in Wolfsburg. The cramped rented quarters in a Lutheran church building were available only for one hour on Sunday mornings. *Kinderstunde* and Sunday School for the older children thus needed to be conducted during weekdays. The church leader, Gerhard Born, and our predecessor Erwin Cornelsen, had made numerous contacts with various levels of government agencies regarding finances. There were verbal commitments from the federal and state governments that help would be available. They also had obtained an architect and made numerous inquiries with the town regarding legal requirements. Although we had to redraft much of the preliminary work, we were guided by that foundational preparation.

With the help of some Canadian funds, financial support from North German Mennonite congregations and individuals, contributions from federal and state governments and loans from the City of Wolfsburg and the Dutch Mennonites, we managed to establish a financial base

to build the church. With the help of many volunteers from other congregations which had *Umsiedler* membership, we began and completed the structure. It was a gigantic undertaking for a small congregation of mostly elderly people. The exciting aspect of it all is that now, eight years later, all the loans except for a small interest-free loan from the City of Wolfsburg have been repaid. Furthermore, the congregation is in the process of enlarging and renovating the building.

A tragedy befell our small overworked group when Gerhard Born, chairman of the church and the building committee, fell from a scaffold and was fatally injured. That accident tested our faith and determination. Born was 75 years old and was in poor health with a damaged hip, high blood pressure and constant dizziness. He never should have been allowed on the scaffold. Also, the scaffold had not been built according to factory specifications. At one time authorities even considered charging our congregation with criminal negligence for having a 75-year-old, sick man on the scaffold. But he represented the dedication and support which the older members of the church gave to the project.

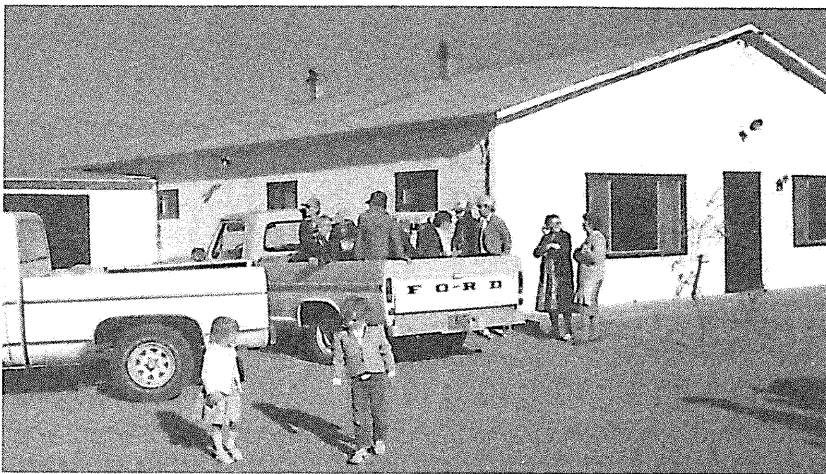
A more uplifting experience was the dedication of the building. Visitors from other Mennonite congregations and dignitaries from the city participated. The offering taken at that service was enough to pay for a new piano for the church. Our predecessors, the Erwin Cornelssens, came for the occasion. At the afternoon session our successors Daniel and Mária Janzen, *Umsiedler* themselves, were installed as new pastors of the congregation.

A final dimension of our ministry was our relationship to non-*Umsiedler* German Mennonite congregations. The Cornelssens already had begun those contacts. I naively pursued the course of this relationship, hoping our *Umsiedler* congregations might have a leavening effect on the Mennonite Conference of North Germany. I attended and worked at a North-South ministers' conference and established relationships which developed into discussions via correspondence. Peter Foth, pastor of the Hamburg Mennonite Church, and I had numerous interchanges about church growth and spiritual vitality. Together we drafted provisional constitutions which might create an umbrella for all German Mennonite churches to relate to each other. However, our *Umsiedler* people resisted being drawn into such discussions. They wanted no contact with churches which, according to their understanding, did not take the Scriptures seriously. I believe the time will come when the people of *Umsiedler* background will have a positive

influence on German church life, but that moment had not yet come. My outreach vision had run ahead of reality.

Since our return from Germany we have been involved in diverse short-term ministries. In 1985 we spent five months in Burwalde, Mexico, a village which is part of the 1920s so-called Swift settlement. Those Old Colony people formerly had lived in the Swift Current region of Saskatchewan. Due to their isolation and very narrow church policies that Mennonite community in Mexico had stagnated badly. Their cultural and spiritual life seemed to have run its course. The Reinländer Church of Manitoba has attempted to help those people by sending them a few ministers. As a result the whole Swift region of several thousand people has renamed itself Reinländer. This name change did not alter church polity nor its Christian vitality.

Through earlier outreach work, the General Conference Mennonite Church through its mission arm, Commission on Overseas Mission (COM), had established three congregations in that community: Burwalde, Steinreich and Santa Rita. The latter two were later daughter settlements and not strictly part of the Swift settlement. Daniel and Elma Peters of the Blumenorter Mennonite Church in Manitoba were the pioneer workers there and might be considered the spiritual parents of many of those people. Due to COM pressure the congregations were encouraged to become indigenous and not rely on expatriates as their leaders. Consequently, the Peters returned to Manitoba to do pastoral work here in Manitoba.



Preparing to go on a picnic with the Burwalde congregation in Mexico in 1985.



The catechism and baptism class which I led in Burwalde, Mexico, in 1985.

Our assignment was to help the church in its transition from control by COM to leadership by the local church. That shift even included transfer of the title for church property from COM to local church people. During our five months there, Susan and I became involved in youth work, women's groups, Sunday School teaching, visitation and much preaching. I was asked to conduct deeper life evening services in four areas. That involved preaching 24 times in a four-week stretch. In Santa Rita I had to speak in Low German. I also conducted a church membership catechism class and a week-long Bible study.

I had an interesting spiritual experience the evening before that four-week assignment. The events had all been announced when I suddenly developed a sore throat. I had experienced something similar before. It had resulted in a severe problem with laryngitis lasting a week or ten days. The night before I was to speak I gargled with a saline solution, took a couple of aspirins, and told the Lord he would have to take over. I could see no doctor. In the morning my voice was fine and in the following few weeks I preached those 24 sermons.

It was a sad Sunday morning when we left Burwalde. The people could not understand that this was to be the end of ministers supplied by COM. They resisted to the end. However, it has worked out well for them. Their local ministers and ministers from Blumenau, a more advanced congregation, have done good work. The congregation has

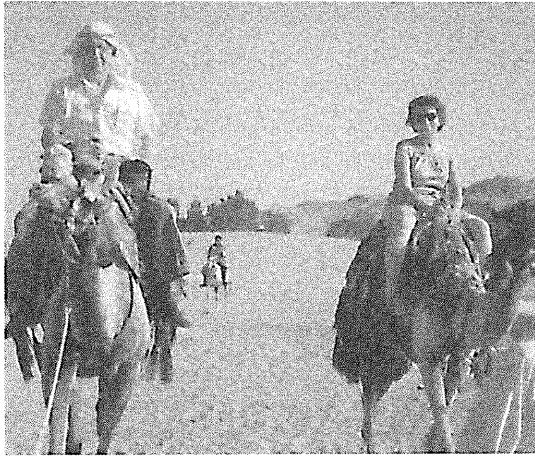
increased in size and maturity. Abe and Hannah Rempel of Winnipeg serve as COM directors for the whole area and act as superintendents and resource people. Daniel and Elma Peters have been back for short-term stints as teachers in the winter Bible school in Steinreich.

After Mexico we had a three-month assignment in Germany, this time to teach mission in the *Umsiedler* churches. I focused on reaching out and relating to people outside of the church. I probably misjudged our people there. Here in Canada we had been in a church planting mode and now I expected that our *Umsiedler* friends could be challenged to reach out to the German population. For some reason my enthusiasm was not contagious. One good brother, an active worker, put it this way: We have suffered through outsiders for so long; now we want to enjoy our fellowship with believers; we are not ready to invite others to become part of us.

That three-month stint in Germany became our last larger charge. Because of conflicting commitments we were unable to respond to two invitations. COM asked us to consider going to India to serve as a listening ear during a period of turmoil in the Mennonite churches there. Another time it invited us to go to Lesotho, Africa, for a Bible teaching assignment. However, there have been countless opportunities to serve at home. Susan has led the Bethel Women in Mission through two two-year terms and is again involved with the Manitoba Women in Mission conference. I have been privileged to conduct numerous Bible studies for seniors, both in Bethania Home and in Bethel Place. Invitations to speak at deeper life or missions events, and occasionally at funerals, have been refreshing.

But there has been more to retirement than service. Retirement has given us a new freedom to do things we never felt free to do before. Travelling has been especially important in the past decade. We have made several trips to Europe to enjoy its gorgeous scenery as well as to visit with our good friends. We have returned to Mexico to refresh memories and to visit our churches. We have made trips to various parts of the United States, to British Columbia and to Ontario. Travelling has taken up much of our holidaying and Susan can never get enough of it.

Retirement also has meant frequent walks in Winnipeg's various parks. Naturally those walks usually included a stop-over at one of Winnipeg's countless doughnut or other coffee shops. Retirement has meant numerous breakfasts and coffees with friends in various restaurants and suppers in homes. Most important of all, retirement has given



Retirement has included travelling. Above, we prepare for a trip across the Sahara Desert. At right: sightseeing in Rothenburg, Germany, in 1989. Below: the Schwarzwald Kuchen and coffee are so refreshing after touring cathedrals and castles with Jake and Katherine Wiens.



Enjoying Susan's birthday in the Deichkrone restaurant beside the Rhine River in 1991.



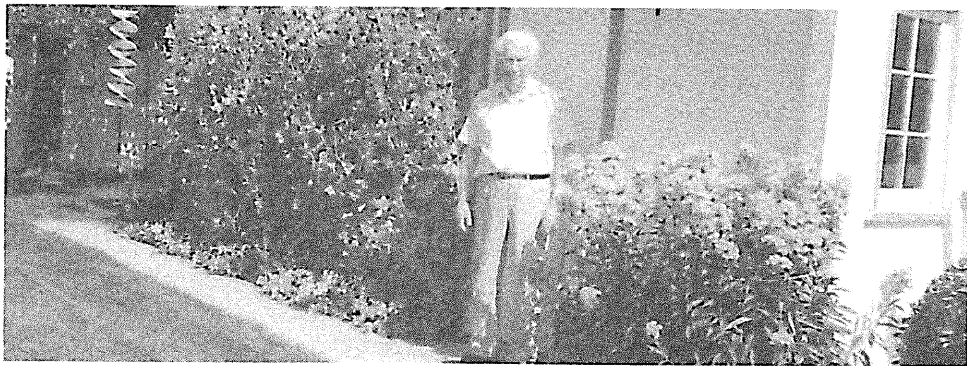
Susan and I enjoy doing dishes together after supper with friends.



Puzzling is a traditional ritual for Susan between Christmas and New Years.



Above: Susan enjoys a leisurely Sunday afternoon in the front yard of our Winnipeg home.



Below: Retirement has included many hours of enjoyable yard work.



Our children, Linda, Elaine, Norma and Gerald, discuss the virtues and idiosyncrasies of our family life on our 45th wedding anniversary in 1989.

Susan and me the opportunity to date, to pick up a courtship that was short-circuited rather mercilessly 50 years ago.

Retirement also has its disadvantages. Nobody gives us a raise in salary and nobody helps us work out dates or even speaks of holidays. Our relationships with former employers seem to diminish more and more as the years go by. Retirement is the last station in life and has only one final ending. With the help of our doctors we are trying to postpone that ending as long as possible. Sometimes we even wonder why retirement was ever invented. Wouldn't it have been good for us to continue in full harness until ill health or death decided that the task was completed? But didn't even our grandparents and parents retire from farming and spend their retirement years in the comfort of a house in town? So we have accepted retirement and are enjoying it.

19

Hinjawääjis . . . En Route

My father used to tell us children stories about an illustrious uncle who seems to have competed with the stories in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. This uncle from southern Manitoba visited Father's parents once a year and on each visit he would come up with a new fascinating story. What intrigued Father was that all those wonderful, enchanting adventures happened to his uncle while he was *hinjawääjis* (on the way, or en route) to grandparents. The Low German word *hinjawääjis* means "on the way," but if it is separated into two syllables it may mean "behind some point."

I too have had my *hinjawääjis* in Christian ministry for over 50 years and much has happened on the way, en route throughout my active life. The difference between my stories and my great-uncle's stories is that mine are actual happenings. They are my own experiences. Apparently everyone had known that my great uncle's *hinjawääjis* encounters were fairy tales.

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Susan and I and Bob and Lucille Geyer were on the deck of a luxury cruise ship on Lake Ontario. With us were 400 other Torontonians on their way to Niagara Falls for a day of holidays. Bob and Lucille were our class mates at the Toronto Missionary Medical Institute and had become our closest friends there. They also had been married that August and this one-day extravaganza was to be our great honeymoon. In 1945, with World War II continuing and the aftermath of the Great Depression hanging over most of the country, Niagara Falls had not yet been built up as it is today. By comparison the site was very



primitive, except for the Falls themselves. We have never seen them more beautiful.

Naturally we could not stand and look at the water all day so we roamed the woods and climbed the hills to get to the highest point for a better view of the Falls. We struggled so hard that, by the time we reached the top of the mountain, we dropped down in sheer exhaustion. But our hearts were young and full of vitality. The sandwiches which Susan and Lucille had prepared for lunch were so tasty. We felt free to be away for a day from our lecturer's four- and five-syllable medical terminology and forget all about the diseases that we were supposed to diagnose and cure. It was a great day, our short though wonderful honeymoon.

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In Mexico I was asked to come to a strange Tarahumara settlement to see a sick person. I did not know the way and a young lad about age 10 was to be my guide. We walked through stretches of rough, mountainous terrain. On our way back he took a totally different route. The path led over a rather high mountain. My heart was beating quickly but I tried to keep up with my guide. I had to because I did not know where I was. When the going got rougher I slowed down, but he ran ahead and called, "Vengassi" (Come). Higher and higher we climbed.

Finally we came upon a beautiful crystal clear stream of water gushing out of a rock. He dropped on his knees and drank and I followed his example. It was very good water. It seemed impossible that there could be such a stream of water up on that mountain top. I doubt whether the staff of Moses could have improved on it. The scenery all around was gorgeous. My proud little guide burst with pride as I took in the sight. A marvellous experience.

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Susan and I walked into a new Tarahumara pueblo, a settlement of about ten families. We came to a small family eating beside their shack. Their food consisted of squash boiled in a sugar cane sauce. They asked us to join them. Following their example, we grabbed the pieces of squash with our fingers from the earthen pot and ate them. How delicious! Then the man who had invited us to the village placed his young child, maybe six years old, before us and said, "Heal her." The child was deaf and dumb. He was not asking for medicine. He was asking for divine healing.

We were stunned. We knew God had the power to open her ears and loosen her tongue. Should we trust God, place our hands on her and ask for that miracle? They did not understand our beliefs. Mexico was full of holy spots where alleged miracles had taken place. Would a miraculous healing open a door or create another phenomenon? We did not ask for divine healing. Should we have?

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One day as I and an older Indian walked through a new mountainous region, we came across a wonder of nature. There was a large rock, almost perfectly hewn from a mountain range a few hundred feet below. Obviously that rock, which was as large as a boxcar, had come from the range below. The Indian and I looked at it and agreed that rock must have come from below. Wanting to challenge or broaden his thinking, I asked, "How did your people lift that rock this high?" In utter amazement he looked at this scientific-minded infidel and nonchalantly answered, "God lifted it." Within the rock strata were the remains of sea life, shells and even petrified fish. I dared not ask how those strata from some lake bottom got up there, nine thousand feet above sea level. The answer would have been as easy as the first one, "God made it that way."

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Susan and I walked down a narrow path which, in places, ran through wooded areas. We carried two lights: a small flashlight and a mantel lantern which lit up a larger circle. Some of our friends had warned us that a bright lantern might make us an easy target for someone who wanted to harm us. We did not think we had any personal enemies. Besides, all shootings that we heard of were related to ongoing family or neighbourhood feuds. We argued that the people had nothing against us. But if we would walk in the dark, we might startle someone. That would put us in far greater danger. The people knew us. They were aware of our late night walks to help people in critical situations and that we always carried our bright lantern.

On that particular walk one of us carried the flashlight to light our steps; the other carried the lantern and Gerald. Suddenly our flashlight exposed a rattlesnake that had curled up on the path. Our next step would have been right on it. After that we understood Psalm 119:105 much better, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

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My driver brought his huge lumber truck to a halt in front of a hotel that had seen better days. The whole Mexican pueblo appeared ready to disintegrate. When I got off the truck a man approached me and said, "There is another coyote of your kind in this town. He lives in this hotel." Anxious to meet a fellow Mennonite in this wilderness I went to the hotel, got his room number and knocked on his door. When he opened the door we immediately recognized each other. Both of us lost our power to breathe. Here, far away from anyone I knew, stood a man who once had threatened to kill me.

Years earlier when I was still in my parental home and my mother was still alive, he had visited us. He was mother's cousin who transported Mennonites between Mexico and Manitoba. He bragged about his exploits, showed off his revolver and told tall stories. He used abusive language. Later one of my aunts confessed that he had abused her. I had written him a letter, admonished him and invited him to faith in Christ. He wrote back and told me if he had the opportunity he would hang me.

Now we met again for the first time since that letter. However, he was not hostile, but subdued and fearful. He seemed to sense that my driver and the people around us were my friends and not his. We had a nice visit. Years later he came to Altona as a very sick man. We were away on some assignment. He had asked for me to visit him in the hospital. Another minister, J. W. Schmidt of Altona, had the blessing of helping that prodigal son of Menno find forgiveness and peace before he died.

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It was December 30, 1948, and I had just dozed off in a hotel in the inter-lake region of Manitoba when a determined knock on my door awoke me. I shouted, "OK." The night before I had asked the hotel keeper to wake me in time for the 6:00 A.M. train. If I missed that train I would have no other way to get back to my family in Altona before New Years. I had been sent to Matheson Island to discuss with our new missionaries, Jake and Trudy Unrau, their needs and how they envisioned the development of their work. The MPM Executive and my colleagues in Bible school apparently expected that my field trip would be preparation for my Bible School class work after Christmas.

Quickly I picked up my shaving kit, rushed to the one washroom in the hotel and got ready to shave. Only then did I look at my wristwatch. It was 3:00 A.M. Quickly I returned to my room. Apparently, someone

had wanted me out of my room. The lock was in poor shape so to secure the door I put a table and chair against it.

When I reported my incident to the hotel keeper next morning, he said, "Think nothing of it. There were lots of drunks roaming the halls trying to find a bed. They meant no harm." It was nice to know that I had no personal enemies and that no one had tried to steal anything. I had just exposed myself as a naive northern traveller. Naturally I was also quite happy that I did not get a drunk bed partner for the night.

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Some years later I returned once more from a field trip to our northern mission stations. It was a beautiful winter afternoon. The sun was bright and the snow on Lake Winnipeg seemed like one vast sea of nothingness. The scenery was breathtaking. My pilot in the two-seater Cessna felt the warmth of the sun through his huge parka and confessed he was sleepy. He offered to teach me a few basics about flying. I took hold of the second stick and throttle. He showed me how to move the plane up and down, left and right, and how to use the throttle to increase or decrease the speed of the plane.

After those few brief instructions he assumed I was an accomplished pilot and stretched out to sleep. And sleep he did. He became so still that I thought he had died. I wondered: what do I do now? I could not stay in the air forever. The plane had enough fuel to get to southern Manitoba. If he didn't wake up, should I manoeuvre it down on a large field somewhere near the pilot's home? Or should I try to bring it down on Lake Winnipeg where there were miles and miles of snow with no fences and farm buildings? I pulled it up a little and down a little. It all worked as my pilot had shown me.

Then he began to stir and slowly came back to life. I did not tell him that I was afraid he had died. I only noticed the perspiration drops coming through my sleeves and mitts.

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One time when I was at Matheson Island for some discussions with Jake and Trudy Unrau, an urgent call came for Jake to come to Loon Straits regarding a crisis illness. A local Matheson Island resident had a heavy boat with an inboard motor that chugged along only a few miles an hour. Jake asked him to take us to Loon Straits during the night. The lake was very rough and that slow moving boat hardly made it over or through those threatening waves.

The messenger who had brought Jake the SOS call quickly caught up with us and decided to have some fun. He had a powerful outboard motor. With one hand on his throttle stick, the other on his liquor bottle, he began circling around our boat, coming closer and closer. The wash from his boat and the waves from the storm were a serious threat to us. He had a hilarious time and sang lustily while we frantically dipped water out of our boat. When we arrived in Loon Straits we were told the child had died and Jake was asked to conduct the funeral. After that experience we could understand a little better why so many people in the north lost their lives in boating accidents.

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I like to tell my friends about the time Air Canada sent a four-engine Lancaster passenger plane with a crew of seven to get me from Toronto to Winnipeg. After a series of services a church member from the Vineland Mennonite Church had taken me to Toronto. My driver had a pressing problem and shared so deeply while we waited in the airport that I did not notice when my fellow passengers gathered for boarding the plane.

When my wait seemed rather long I went to the desk and asked for the departure time for my Winnipeg plane. "You're too late," she said. That plane is just lifting off the runway, but a charter is coming in shortly and will return to Winnipeg immediately. Would you want to go on that?" I hardly knew what a charter was, but said yes.

Almost immediately a stewardess came and asked me to follow her. On the runway waited a huge Lancaster, a type of plane that had become famous during the war. It had a crew of seven, a pilot, a co-pilot, a navigator and four stewardesses. My helpful stewardess told me I would be well attended. They served me lunch and later refreshments. Then she asked if I had any special wish. I asked to ride in the cockpit with the pilot. After checking with him, she ushered me into the co-pilot's seat. I had a very enlightening discussion with a fine gentleman. Really, I had to come back that night and that plane was my only way. Did God send it? All I can say is that God has not always covered up for me when I messed up my schedules.

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Mr. Teichroeb, our Bible school principal and my colleague, called one evening and said there was an urgent need at the Bible school. When I arrived at the school I met a man who was in deep anguish. He

claimed he had committed the unpardonable sin and could only wait for the judgement to come. That sounded strange to me since I considered him to be a fine family and church man. To my knowledge he had a good testimony.

I asked him how he had committed that sin. He said some years ago he had come to our house to take me to the local hospital to see his brother-in-law who apparently was on his death bed. He had said his relative was not ready to die. On the way to the hospital I had asked him whether he had the assurance of salvation. He had answered in the affirmative. "But," he said, "that was a lie. I had no assurance and was deeply depressed." He claimed that God had forsaken him totally and his prayers seemed to go no farther than the ceiling.

Teichroeb and I then wanted to know why he had come to see us and why he was concerned. He answered, "I want to have forgiveness and I want to be a Christian." We told him that if God's spirit was not convicting him and inviting him he would not have such a concern. He insisted that God did not want him. We told him to ignore his feelings, kneel down with us and tell God why he was there. We knelt down and both Teichroeb and I prayed. He began to pray haltingly, with a very heavy heart, and to tell God what sin he had committed. Suddenly his voice changed and he began to praise God for forgiveness and much more. That was more than 40 years ago and every time I meet him he still has that "praise the Lord" relationship. The Gospel works.

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At times weddings could be frustrating. I was worship leader at one wedding where the bride and groom and the officiating minister came from another congregation. Things just didn't want to go right. To make it worse, the visiting minister found our church setting intimidating and felt uneasy. His shaking hands could not be kept out of sight. The young couple began to get nervous as well. To top it off, someone opened the door leading to the office north of the pulpit. A gust of wind scattered his pile of 20 small pages of notes right in front of the couple he was to marry. The couple helped gather up the notes and gave them to their shaking minister. Alas, the pages had not been numbered. Needless to say the young couple got a wedding sermon that was slightly confused. The saving factor was that the decision to get married had been made before that frustrating wedding service unfolded. They stayed married despite the service.

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On one occasion one of those freelance ministers officiated at the marriage of our church member to a non-church member. Because of our church's restrictions I could not marry them so I led the service. After the sermon the couple was asked the traditional questions. However, the minister did not know either of them and had forgotten the name of the bride. Quickly he made a guess and used that name when asking the groom whether he accepted her to be his wedded wife. The groom said "yes." After the vows were finished I told the minister the bride's name and suggested he should make a correction. He whispered back, "If I do that the whole congregation will notice." I told him the congregation already had, since she was a well known church member. The situation could be improved only if the correction was made.

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As a member of the church *Wohltätigkeitskomitee* (Welfare Committee) Susan joined deacon David B. Friesen to prepare hampers for needy families. Christmas was drawing near and one particular family appeared to be in dire need. Much had been said about that family. Some thought they were on the verge of starvation. An especially large hamper with food and Christmas goodies, including buns baked by Susan and a rooster from the Friesen farm, was prepared. When Susan and D. B. Friesen brought the hamper to the home, they were greeted by a small war. A barrage of unidentified missiles was flying back and forth across the room. To avoid being struck they entered the house slowly. Apparently another benevolent organization had been there first. The missiles flying across the room were delicious buns. When Susan came home she confessed, "Those people are probably overfed. They did not appreciate our help."

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A long-time family friend dating back to my mother's pre-marriage years had died. Earlier I had officiated at her husband's funeral but the family had not contacted me for the woman's burial. When we arrived at the funeral in the Lowe Farm church, I noticed the funeral director and the family members seemed somewhat confused. After our car was parked I sent someone to the waiting people and asked, "Who is officiating at this funeral?" The answer came back. "You are."

Quickly I went to the local deacon and asked him for a Bible and the black tie he was wearing. Mine was red. Then I went to the hearse

and arranged for the entrance procession. The local minister made a few introductory comments and I was asked to take the service from there. There used to be a saying in revival circles, "A Christian must always be ready to pray, to preach and to die." That time I tested the preaching part and it worked. However, as a guiding principle I found that the Lord wanted me to use time to prepare.

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One Sunday in our Altona home, we had just begun to eat our noon lunch when the phone rang. With a chuckle the caller, not from our church, volunteered that if we still needed him he would teach one of our Sunday School classes. He said his call was in response to my public appeal. I did not understand. "Which public appeal?" I asked. He said our church service had been on the radio that morning. That was a surprise to us.

When the CFAM radio station began broadcasting in 1957 it invited churches to air their morning worship services. The Altona Bergthaler Church took its turn once a month. To facilitate this the public address system in our church was connected directly to CFAM. Naturally there was a switch at the radio station which controlled the feed. That switch should have been off since it was not our broadcast Sunday. That morning the operator at CFAM was either uninformed or not alert enough. He noticed our service coming through and put us on the air. He broadcast all preliminaries and announcements. On behalf of our Sunday School superintendent I had made an urgent appeal for Sunday School teachers.

A number of people called, telling us that our broadcast was better unprepared than prepared. When CFAM management discovered next day what had happened they came and discussed the issue with us. They apologized. Manitoba Telephone System asked us to sign a legal document absolving them of all responsibility and asking us to promise them that we would not sue for damages. They and the station waived all ordinary expenses. It had not been a bad experience after all.

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One evening we were just finishing our meal when I suddenly remembered: We were not supposed to be at home but at the supper table of two sisters, Katherine and Elizabeth Peters. Those sisters were special to us. Katherine had been a school teacher and Elizabeth a nurse. They were both widely read and we often discussed books or

issues that came from special books. During our earlier years in Altona they had been our bank. They lent us money at very low interest rates and frequently even waived the interest.

That was a very special invitation. There had been complaints at a membership meeting that the ministers did not visit enough in the homes. Then one of the Peters sisters suggested that members probably did not invite enough. Now we had been invited and we had forgotten. Quickly we dashed off to the Peters' home and apologized for being late. The chicken dinner was ready and we sat down to eat. We worked hard on that meal and our stomachs twisted and squirmed. Conversation was somewhat difficult.

A few years later, when Elizabeth had already passed away, we visited with Katherine. We acknowledged our bungling of that dinner invitation. Katherine laughingly said, "We already knew it that evening when you struggled so hard with that chicken dinner." We apologized. Both the meal and the conversation would have been so much more pleasant if we would have come out with the truth immediately and acknowledged that we had finished our supper.

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I came to visit one of our church members in the hospital. In the bed next to her was a dying nun from St. Joseph's Convent several miles northeast of Altona. She appeared to be in a deep coma. On the chair beside the bed sat a Roman Catholic Mother Superior, dressed in the habit worn by leading Catholic nuns at that time.

This woman immediately addressed me and, when she discovered I was a local minister, she handed me some gospel tracts and asked whether I objected if she would distribute them to our church members in the hospital. I read a few of them and discovered they were just ordinary tracts inviting people to the Lord. That precipitated more discussion and sharing. She wanted to know what Mennonites believed.

As I shared about our beliefs, which included nonviolence, this dignified woman suddenly jumped up, threw her arms around me and shouted, "You are a Christian."

By that time I too was standing. She prodded me to say more and shouted again, "Praise the Lord, you are a Christian." Her outbursts created enough excitement to draw some of the nurses to see what was happening.

There I stood with this Sister in her religious garb, still holding my

hands. Then she drew back and explained, "I am Irish"—her exuberance indicated as much. Then she went on, "I come from Northern Ireland. Several years ago my father was gunned down by supporters of Ian Paisley, the Baptist preacher. Since then I have regarded all Protestants as murderers. When you told me you did not believe in killing and that this was a Mennonite position, I concluded you were a Christian."

I have not met that woman again. Was this meeting and her expression part of her working through her hatred? Was she showing that she was ready to forgive?

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It had been a bad spring for farmers. First, there had been dust storms, then too much rain. Already it was June and some farmers were beginning to be nervous about their crop prospects.

On one of my trips into the country I came to the home of John L. and Helen Klassen. Helen informed me that John was out on the field seeding wheat. It seemed a bit late in the season for seeding.

When I went to the field, John invited me to join him in his tractor cab. It was inspiring to see how a Christian farmer trusted God and entrusted his seed to the ground at such a late date.

I had forgotten about that experience. One day I had an urgent phone call from Helen, asking me to go to the field where I had "helped" John with the seeding. Really, John had helped me.

When I drove to the field, John invited me into his combine cab. He was harvesting a fairly good crop. According to them, this was the crop which my presence with John had blessed.

How good it was to see a committed Christian farming couple live out their faith in their daily encounter with the elements of nature over which they had no control

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Martin Luther King, Jr., was dead and the General Conference Mennonite Church in Newton had asked whether the Seminary might find a few people to go to Atlanta, Georgia, to attend King's funeral. I was one of the six male volunteers. It was a 700-mile drive. We decided to go there in one night, spend the day at the funeral and drive back the next night. In Atlanta we found the city choked with funeral guests, estimated at four to six hundred thousand. We got within four blocks of the Baptist church, the site of the family funeral.

Then began the famous peace march to the college campus for the public funeral. It was highly ironic that this man of peace, whose people and friends came to mourn, was thought so dangerous. The governor of Georgia had moved in large armies of troops. We marched past fixed bayonets, rows and rows of army tanks and other war arsenal. During our four-mile march we walked shoulder to shoulder. The six seminary students had by this time become separated. All of us knew where we had left our vehicle. The mourners sang, "We shall overcome" over and over again. I learned to sway along with my fellow black mourners. During the walk, and on the college campus, I repeatedly asked the people next to me one question, "Who will take up your cause?" Invariably the answer came back with an emphatic, "You! We have done our share. Now our freedom must be carried forward by the white people." That answer came from a female college professor from New York City and from a labourer in Georgia.

An interesting incident happened as the mule hearse passed by not far from where I stood. A tiny black woman stood in front of me. I then noticed a suitcase, all tattered and torn, close to us. I told the woman, "Step on it and I will hold you up so you can see the coffin of your leader." She turned around and in good grandmotherly fashion admonished me, "I would not damage other people's property."

Among us in that large mass of hundreds of thousands of people were six U.S. presidential aspirants, including Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller and Robert Kennedy. Because of Kennedy's sympathy for and appeal to blacks, he alone was asked to sit on the platform with the funeral speakers.

For a few brief hours I felt I had walked with people who were hurting yet who seemed more liberated than those who stood behind those ominous, deadly guns watching over us. Throughout that day countless people pressed my hands, embraced me and thanked me for making their sorrow my sorrow. I felt I had rubbed shoulders with some of the great people of our time.

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It had been a smooth flight but I had seen neither prairies nor mountains. My plane had been above the clouds and fog all the way. During the last part of the flight I had been sleeping and had not noticed that we were approaching Vancouver. I also had not noticed that our plane was changing into a banking position. I looked out of my window and then I noticed. There, way up in the night sky was a city, a gorgeous

city bathed in dazzling light. As my plane came out of its circle that city came down slowly. What a wonderful sight! It was breathtaking. The city of Jerusalem in the book of Revelation was coming down. For a split second I seemed to feel that moment. Is this true? Is it happening and am I witnessing it? Then the loud speaker called out, "Fasten your seat belts." Soon our wheels rumbled down the runway. It was a rude awakening. Where had the beauty gone? Our pilgrimage here on earth needed to continue.

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We drove into that dilapidated yard just as darkness closed in on us. It was January. The snowdrifts were high and the thermometer threatened to drop into its red ball below. On the west side of the house was a giant snowbank with a huge dog perched on it, watching us approach the house. Behind the snowdrift was the only other building to be seen, a small biffy. We had planned to stay here for the night, a long distance from anywhere in northern Saskatchewan.

Abe Neufeld, Conference Minister in Saskatchewan, and I, General Secretary for the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, were visiting a rural church. The minister who lived in that lonely, forsaken place was pastor of a small struggling congregation. He was on partial financial support from the Conference. His wife, the mother of a number of small children, had poverty, hardship and fear written over her face. She seemed to carry a burden she was not ready to share.

That evening we tried to help with counsel and encouragement. As a result of our discussion the office in Winnipeg sent that minister about a hundred dollars worth of resources on sermon preparation. His only reading material besides the Bible was the *Western Producer*, a good magazine for farmers. It seemed to us the minister had no vision, no courage and appeared very passive. We did not know at the time that he was dying of some kind of painless cancer.

As the evening progressed the mice grew ever bolder as they scampered from one side of the room to the other. When I saw no beds for the children or for us, my mind began to move quickly. Here was a hard floor, lots of mice and children who would need the available blankets. That snowdrift behind the house and the dog guarding that biffy seemed more scary as the minutes went by. We had to get away. I said to Abe, "If we want to get to our destination, we will have to start driving." Abe jumped up. The woman seemed to get a new lease on life and was so happy to have seen us.

When we got into the car, Abe asked, "Now where did you want to go?" I replied, "I have no idea." Abe suggested, "Let's drive down the highway until we see a sign to a town." Northern Saskatchewan did not have many towns in those parts, yet we found one with a small hotel. It was primitive, but its toilet seat was not in a frozen biffy behind a snowbank guarded by a huge dog and no mother needed to worry where to leave her small children for the night. I had gained a new appreciation of poverty in the backwoods of northern Saskatchewan

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The site did not look attractive. There were some bushes, some rocks and mostly gravel. My minister friend told me it was very expensive land and tried to persuade me to buy a few acres. He claimed that a friend of his had divulged a secret that was to be safely guarded: an important highway was coming through that area and that spot was the site which eventually would be a cloverleaf. My friend said, "Buy the land now and in a few years you can sell it for a fortune."

The lure of having money knocked on my door. For a moment I was blinded by possibilities. We had never had savings and a few thousand dollars in the bank would be so nice. I thought of the Altona Credit Union. I had 47 cents in my former checking account. I had been told if you write a cheque with no account it is fraud. If you write a cheque larger than the amount you have, then it is simply an overdrawn account. I knew the people in the Altona Credit Union well and was confident they would give me a temporary loan if I called them. I told my friend to wait until morning.

During the night, like Nebuchadnezzar of old, I had sanity restored to me and saw clearly how utterly foolish the whole thing was. People in that local municipality would immediately be suspicious if a poor minister from Winnipeg wanted to buy that worthless land. Furthermore, I was on church business and this would be a glaring example of conflict of interest. I had no business trying to make money on a church- and conference-sponsored trip. Finally, I knew that the man who divulged information out of those office files had broken the law and I had been tempted to take part in an illegal transaction. God forbid! The temptation for a fast dollar had evaporated. The highway was never built.

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A certain church council had invited me to help them celebrate an important anniversary. On Friday and Saturday evening I was to speak to deeper life issues. Then on Sunday morning was the great anniversary service. Old-timers and friends of the church would be there. After the service there was to be a big feast with a hot meal for all who came. A large sports hall had been rented for the occasion.

Early Sunday morning the housewives of that church prepared their roasts, casseroles, vegetables, etc., for the feast. Cooking ranges were set and those who had no time clocks gauged carefully when to turn on the ovens to have the roasts ready for the noon meal at 12 o'clock.

The church was packed to the door. The pastor of the church, a graduate of a non-Mennonite college who had not been kindly disposed toward me before, led the worship service. Now he was in charge. I too was under his control. He used a lot of time for himself and, unknown to the chairman of the congregation, he had lined up speaker after speaker to come and give testimony about the years gone by. One speaker spoke endlessly. As the morning went by I sat and tried to rework in my mind a carefully prepared anniversary talk. I had thoroughly researched that congregation's history from its beginning before the turn of the century.

Finally, at five to twelve, the pastor remembered their officially invited anniversary speaker and asked me to bring my message. I started by saying, "Ladies, I know your roasts are in the ovens and it is time to pull them out. If I use the time given to me, those roasts will be overdone and I too will be roasted. If I don't speak, the people who are interested in this church and its anniversary story will roast me. What shall I do?" My temptation was to have the pastor roasted by pointing out that he had deliberately taken my time. I knew that to be the case. He did not like our Conference and had said various things against us.

The consensus was that I should speak as quickly as possible, cut my time and give their history and challenge. Both the minister and I had other people to talk to during the noon meal. For some reason there did not seem to be the affinity between us to draw us to the same spot at the same time. That timing appeared to be mutual.

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It had been a good conference. The Bloor Street United Church facilities had been ideal for our larger assemblies and group meetings. Our Conference chairman, David P. Neufeld, had brought the confer-

ence to a climax in his closing comments and the people had left church in good spirits.

As usual during my years as General Secretary, I was one of the last people to leave the premises. While I was packing my briefcase, the technician in charge of the public address system came and thanked me for the privilege of having been able to serve us. He had been hired by the United Church to be there for every session.

Then came the bombshell. He told me he was not a believer and had no use for religion and the church. He also shared that he was really a nobody with no family connections. He came from a long line of non-church people and did not even know whether he was English, Scottish or Irish. That Mennonite conference had shown him religion in a way that attracted him. He wanted to go the way of faith. He wanted to connect to the church more directly. I asked him which particular part of our convention had kindled this desire. I wondered which speaker had inspired him. He then acknowledged that he hadn't listened at all and nothing that had been said attracted him.

I asked, "What then made you want to look at the Christian faith?" He said, "Close to my control panel sat several older women. Those women, all German-speaking, had demonstrated to him that they had community. They were part of something larger than he could grasp. During the communion service they had started to sing several hymns that he had not understood. I still recall those sessions when we had spontaneous singing during the communion service: "O mein Jesu du bist's wert" and "Ich weisz einen Strom." Those women and that free singing had shown a self-proclaimed infidel technician that Christian community was real. Even our great outreach workers and professional church planters had not pointed that out to us. God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

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Our Burundi Airways DC8 winged its way across Africa in the direction of Nairobi, Kenya. Susan, chairperson of the Canadian Women in Mission (CWM), had been appointed by the General Conference Women in Mission to represent CWM at a Mennonite World Conference presidium meeting in Nairobi. We both travelled at our own expense. I was her escort. Other Canadian delegates were Jake Pauls, a conference vice chairman, his wife Dorothy, and Jake Tilitzky, General Conference president.

It so happened that I had a seat next to a well dressed gentleman

from the Middle East. The long flight allowed us to talk about various issues. He belonged to the Iraqi government's foreign diplomatic corp. He had spent considerable time in England. I believe he had a British university education. Our conversation turned to religion and after a while he volunteered that he hated Christians. He then talked of the terrible Crusades and how the Muslims had suffered. He chafed under British and other western nations' oil explorations and exploitations. I tried to explain the Crusades and that we too did not condone what those crusaders had done to the Muslim community.

Then I gave my testimony as a Mennonite. He had never heard of us. He knew no church history. I explained our faith and what we did. I talked of the anticipated meeting with our brothers and sisters of other nations, notably Africa. I talked about MCC. It was all new to him. He had thought every Christian was a cutthroat.

Finally he said, "You people should come to Iraq. We need people like you in our country." What would have happened if I had followed through on his comments? Should MCC have made a greater attempt to work in Iraq? Would we have touched Saddam Hussein and changed his course without the use of guns? Hardly? Maybe?

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I had been invited to represent our Conference at an inter-church gathering on work among Native people. The meeting was to be in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan. I was to receive a ride from Saskatoon on the morning of the conference. I took the train to Saskatoon. To conserve strength I took a berth and went to sleep as the train pulled away from the CNR station in Winnipeg. I woke up in the morning just a few miles outside the station. We had been on a siding all night. Naturally, by the time we finally arrived in Saskatoon I had missed my ride.

I called a friend in Rosthern. He told me to come down by bus and he would take me to Meadow Lake next morning. That trip was an experience I will never forget. My friend, Henry W. Friesen, had many good qualities, but driving a car was not one of them. He seemed to time his stops and starts meticulously well. He started driving on the red light and stopped on the green. Traffic controls were for bad guys, not for people who drove with the Lord.

After we got out of Rosthern he said, "Henry, let's pray." Only those people who have been with Henry Friesen in prayer could appreciate that statement. Henry prayed long, intimately and sincerely. He be-

longed to God and God to him. He discussed issues with God and planned with God. He was like a child who knew his mother intimately and, without using formal prayer language, he discussed our trip with God. Asking God for protection gained special meaning for me in one town where his VW beetle came into the path of a heavy timber truck. Somehow the Lord got us out of its path just in time before we were crushed.

I do not remember the issues of the conference nor the themes discussed with Henry while we drove. But that saint's relationship with his God became real to me. Although Henry was a poor driver and not a good organizer, he walked with God in a way that touched thousands of children, youth and adults. He is with his Lord now. I suspect at times he is still telling the Lord what to do.

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We were on our way to Frankfurt to fly to Canada for Conference work and to renew our medical insurance policy. On the *Autobahn* we came to an exit leading to Community B where we wanted to visit a retired couple—not *Umsiedler*. The woman was suffering from severe depression. We had visited her before in the psychiatric ward of a large city hospital.

When we arrived on the yard, this woman, usually so well dressed, and her husband presented a pitiful sight. Her unkempt hair hung down; her night clothes and whole demeanour spoke only of hopelessness. The heavy drugs and shock treatment had taken their toll. This woman, so beautiful and full of life before, appeared to have no future.

We tried to talk, to give encouragement. She did not respond. We asked whether we could pray, then formed a circle around her right there on their patio. Susan and I embraced her and her husband and asked the Lord for help, for diving healing. Then we left the yard, drove to Frankfurt and flew back to Winnipeg.

On our return three weeks later, we drove to our friends' yard and could hardly believe our eyes. The woman was dressed and combed as in earlier times. She was smiling and claimed that her healing had started right after our prayer. No longer did she need drugs or shock treatments. She and her husband had found new life.

To this day she rejoices that the Lord healed her. When we get birthday cards or telephone calls, she refers to her healing. God still performs miracles.

20

Reflections

During our ministry in Germany Susan and I met many people whom life had treated cruelly. Generations of individuals in the former Soviet Union had been deprived of all opportunities to decide for themselves what they were to be and do in life. They had become the product of a harsh state's designs. However, out of that oppressive, tragic milieu came many people of pure character, ambitious, hard-working, dedicated to God and their people. How had they survived in that life-robbing system? Thousands had succumbed to the pressures of totalitarianism. We found no easy answer.

The congregational chairman in Wolfsburg was an example. He had been wrongly accused, like many others, to the secret police and spent ten years in a labour camp. Years after his release he received a document which stated that he had been innocent. Our friend was not bitter. In Germany he sought out the man who had wrongly accused him and extended the hand of forgiveness and friendship. During his years of incarceration he had steeled his character; he had practised forgiveness and learned a valuable profession, accounting. He had successfully converted his misfortune into triumph. He was an example of many, many others.

I was not born and raised in the oppressive climate of the Soviet Union but in the free air of pioneering Manitoba. Nevertheless, various forces were also at work, moulding me and directing my decisions. Although the conforming forces of a free society are different in appearance than those of a regimented society, they are equally, and it seems at times more, effective. When our forebears came to Canada, government and society leaders immediately went to work to integrate

them into the Canadian society. Cruel oppression would have been no more successful. Our people have conformed.

Now that I am in my upper seventies I ask the question: How successful have I been in being myself, or am I just another carbon copy of my environment? I have tried to live my own life in society. That was the message of our parental home during my childhood. When we wanted to do certain things and maintained that everyone else was doing it, we were told “Daut jeziemt sikj ons nijch” (“That is not becoming to us”).

I had always hoped to sort out my theological beliefs, my understanding of church polity, my vision regarding mission outreach, and to write about those issues. I never found the time. During my public ministry there were several segments of major involvement: the Mexico experience, the Elim Bible school, the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Altona and Manitoba, the Conferences and Germany. The Mexico work, the Altona church work and the Germany ministries were team efforts together with Susan.

However, during all those years I permitted numerous other responsibilities to come in and take up my time and effort. Because of too many involvements, insufficient finances and lack of initiative I have not been able to set aside time for more study, reflection and writing. Therefore, I ruefully must admit that I have allowed society, albeit Christian, to mould me and largely direct my activities. I cannot change that now.

The sunshine of life has shone brightly on Susan and me. Our marriage had a somewhat faltering beginning. I am stoical by nature and therefore never very romantic. I began my courtship during my CO assignment in Cross Lake and then made my inner preparations for marriage with concerns about an indefinite future on my mind. I became very depressed about trading my work with Native people under the United Church for a work in Mexico that I feared. Under those stressful circumstances I was not very romantic. Then followed the termination of the Mexico work and the slow emergence of our new vocational direction. All that took a heavy toll on our relationship. I did not give Susan the love and support she needed.

Nevertheless, God sustained and blessed us, much of that due to her effort. Our love grew and the longer we live together, the stronger is our love for each other. Now as we approach our fiftieth wedding anniversary we have discovered the pleasure of simply being together. In our very busy years of service we did not give ourselves time for

that. Just taking a walk in the park and sitting down for a cup of coffee is an enjoyable romantic experience.

God has given us health and a dynamic, positive family. At the time of this writing (December 1993) Gerald and Esther are both involved in educational work here in Winnipeg. Esther is very busy with special-needs children in the Winnipeg One school district. Gerald teaches and is academic dean at Canadian Mennonite Bible College. Their three children are all attending Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, Virginia in grade 7, Bradley in grade 10 and Nathan in grade 12. Besides their studies they are all very active with the school's various sports activities.

Elaine has been a family therapist with Winnipeg Family Services for a number years and is involved in various other organizations which relate to human social needs. Her husband, Abe Bergen, was youth minister with the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba for many years and is now director of youth ministry for the General Conference Mennonite Church. Their son, Jeremy, has finished Westgate and is in his first year at Canadian Mennonite Bible College. Their daughter, Rachel, is in grade 10 at Westgate.

Norma is a resource teacher in the Rhineland School Division and her husband John teaches at Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna. Their girls, Laura and Julia, are in grades 7 and 5 in the Altona Elementary School system.

Linda lives in Winkler and serves as librarian in one of the town schools. Her husband, Eckhart Claassen, teaches grade 5 in Winkler. Their son, Jonathan, is in grade 7 and their daughter, Vanessa, in grade 5. All nine grandchildren enjoy their studies. We are thankful to God that they are all healthy and bright young people. We are especially thankful that they are all active in the church and, we trust, moving toward their own faith in God.

Susan and I have many rich memories of working with other people. With nostalgia we look to our Altona church members, the teaching colleagues and students of Elim, our conference friends across Canada and the United States, the lovely people of Wolfsburg and other *Umsiedler* congregations, the other German conferences and our General Conference Mennonites of Mexico. These thousands of people have moulded and shaped us. They are part of our wealth. We are rich.

Very much of our being is rooted in the experiences we have had. I recall how I was influenced when our son Gerald brought home from College the book, *Honest to God*, by Bishop John A.T. Robinson and

he and I read it together. Elaine enlarged our horizon when she came home with nurses' training and new feminist thinking. Together with Elaine and Norma we read extensively in Mormon literature, and with a Hindu teacher in Altona I read Hindi writings. I was amazed and enthralled when we watched Norma handle the immense problems of East Berlin where she and John spent four years, and fearlessly dared study East Germany's educational philosophy. I still think nostalgically of our journey with Linda in her sorting out of Winnipeg societal influences and our family values.

Our formal and informal contacts with teachers, colleagues, associates and friends have been part of our development. It seems now we should live life once more and be more mature. Now we should be ready to face those different challenges and make fewer mistakes and hurt fewer people. We might have acted differently in Mexico, in Elim, in the Berghaler setting and in conference engagements if maturity had come earlier. But we pass through life only once. Hopefully others will not have to make the same mistakes.

Faith Journey

In several brief paragraphs I now want to reflect on certain aspects of life and thought. In the chapter, "Spiritual Journey," I state that my conversion was somewhat anticlimactic. In Mennonite and in other so-called evangelical circles the matter of becoming God's children is variously called and experienced. The simple statement in John 3:16, "Whoever believes has eternal life," is claimed by those who believe in a sudden, climactic conversion and by those who believe conversion must remain a life-long surrender to God through Jesus Christ. I believe there is no contradiction. It is both.

I recall the evangelist who came to Lowe Farm during the early 1930s who based instant conversions on that verse, then also assured his converts that they had immediate eternal life and were safe for ever. In a limited sense he was right. But the verb "believe" is not only a present experience. A runner does not only start the race. He or she continues to run to the finish. Therefore, it is perfectly correct to speak of having been saved, now being saved and will be saved upon entering eternal rest. The old Sommerfelder Church sage was quite correct in asking, when he was told that some wayward man had been climactically saved, "Did he fall over and die immediately?" What he meant was that, if someone had experienced the three stages of salvation all

at one time, he must have been ready and finished with this life.

However, in our day it seems that too little emphasis is placed on that first encounter with Christ. A race is never run nor finished if it is not started. That start may be sudden and climactic for some and very gradual with hardly any external emotions for others. It would have been very helpful for those young people during the early 1930s if the evangelist had informed them that a decision for Christ is the beginning. After that follows a life of growth and discipleship. It remains essential that a relationship with Jesus Christ must be established.

Church Polity

Another area that needs much more reflection is the pastoral church polity which Mennonites have borrowed from other church traditions. When we began our work in Altona no questions were asked regarding salary. It was taken for granted that I would work in the church as a lay minister. During our earlier years that meant serving on a part-time basis and finding a means of livelihood for myself and family on my own. There would be no financial remuneration from the church. That other work was found in Elim Bible School during winter and in various other activities in summer. It was not easy and our family, especially Susan, was under a great deal of stress because of the continual shortage of funds to buy food. After about 12 years the church began to pick up some of my salary and eventually I was completely salaried.

In reflecting on my own experience and watching what is happening to many of our ministers today, the question needs to be asked whether the present salaried, professional pastoral polity is what we Mennonites need. It seems we have an increasing number of hurt pastors in our Conference congregations today. Also, we are constantly coping with a shortage of good pastors. Why don't more people, men and women, go into pastoral work? Why are there so many situations where congregations appear unhappy with their pastor or are so hard on the pastor? Why do we have so many frustrated pastors? It seems to me the fault does not necessarily lie with the pastors. Nor do I believe the fault lies entirely with the congregations. Naturally there will be exceptions, as there always have been.

I believe one dimension of our dilemma lies in our unchallenged acceptance of a pastoral polity that may not fit our Anabaptist, biblical understanding of ministry. Several aspects of our direction need to be

tested under the scrutiny of Scripture. Today few of our pastors are called from out of the membership through discernment of gifts. This does not mean that pastors or ministers should always stay with the congregations which nurtured them or called them. But the initial experience, the early schooling, would be under the tutelage of an experienced bishop-leader.

Secondly, very few pastors have the security which a ministerial body provides. Our constant, strong focus on the salaried pastor is preventing us from calling out of the congregation more ministers who might be a support to the pastor. In the present system the pastor stands alone, usually responsible only to the church council. Even though we might call a person from outside the congregation and give that person a salary, it would still be helpful to have that person work within a locally called ministerial body. No one person has all the gifts needed to nurture a congregation. Not all members of a ministerial body would need to be salaried. If we allow the present trend to continue we may in the future also have to hire our music and education directors. Fewer and fewer gifts will be called from within the congregation. That is not the New Testament model for the church.

Until the 1950s the majority of our congregations within the Conference of Mennonites in Canada were in some form related to a cluster of churches under the leadership of bishops and ministerial bodies. Included among those were the Rosenorter in Saskatchewan and the Whitewater, Blumenorter, Bergthaler and Schoenwieser groupings in Manitoba. Those structures were brought from Prussia to Russia and then to Canada. They had their strengths and also their weaknesses. Perhaps there were too many weaknesses and not enough safeguards built into that system. It seemed that some bishops assumed they were ordained in their positions until death. In the Bergthaler setting a constitution that governed their calling was adopted only shortly before the dissolution of the central system. By the mid-1960s we had defrocked most bishops and thereby set in motion the localization of the congregations. We thought the conferences would assume all responsibility for those groups.

The solution to the difficulties caused by the disintegration of the older system does not lie in going back to the past. Life does not function that way. The training of children, though remarkably well done by my grandparents' or my parents' generation, cannot be repeated by our children. However, there may be principles that could give us some help. We cannot go back to the time when church clusters

like the Bergthaler, the Blumenorter or Rosenorter resolved pastoral issues in their own way. However, the principles they used for finding and calling ministers from within their congregations, or by which the ministers cared for and supported each other, may still be applied today.

The apostle Paul speaks of various spiritual gifts of the church. This list of gifts includes gifts of administration and care-giving. Congregations need to understand that the gifts of those in the church who administer are as spiritual as the gifts of those who teach the Word. Simply “firing” a minister doesn’t resolve the minister’s nor the congregation’s needs. Perhaps as much as seminars on church growth, we need seminars for church council members which focus on how to guide the work of the local church. Maybe we should institute some kind of board of elders which is responsible for the spiritual welfare of both the minister and the congregation.

In the past the typical scenario for calling a minister was something like the following. A deacon or minister from a local congregation might share a need and indicate that the work was simply too difficult for him to carry alone. That plea for help was discussed by the central ministerial. A decision was made to pray about calling a worker in that area. The whole Bergthaler Church was asked to join in prayer for a new worker. That approach was biblically based. About a year later the issue was taken a step further. Announcements were made to start praying for guidance that might point to a specific person. When it seemed somewhat apparent that several men in that district might have that gift and calling, preparations were made for election. There were always two or more candidates for the one minister to be chosen. The election took place and the bishop of the central church then visited with the chosen candidate who was urged to begin working. After a year or so he would be ordained.

Both the congregations and the spiritual leaders looked upon that election as a call for life. That did not mean there could be no change. There were unwritten mechanisms built in that allowed ministers to retreat or to move to other areas of service. I still recall how one minister unexpectedly shared at one of our monthly meetings, “My wife and I have prayed much and felt the Lord calling us to another district.” That meant selling land, buying land and moving. It did not change the minister’s status and might have meant an expansion of the Bergthaler Church. That is how Grunthal, Steinbach, MacGregor, Gladstone and Homewood were brought into the Bergthaler orbit.

The changes of the past have not gone without response. Various attempts have been made by certain individuals to fill the void that was left by the loss of bishops. Our pastoral leadership committees have worked heroically, especially with paper questionnaires and various forms, to help identify the problems which ministers and congregations have. However, the supporting, loving security of a ministerial body where ministers share and help each other has been missing. Therefore, I find it very timely that our present CMC Committee on Ministerial Leadership is once more moving in that direction. I sincerely hope that our future ministers' conferences will be dominated not only by highly trained professionals who have all the answers but will be a setting where ordinary pastors can share and help each other. Whatever we do, I trust we will find a better way than voting every few years whether or not people like the pastor. I am happy for the new direction that appears to be developing.

Mission Outreach

A further area which needs much more reflection is that of mission outreach. As a young Christian in the early 1930s I was convinced that every obedient Christian should be willing to be a foreign missionary. I struggled hard to identify my calling. Now the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. Mission outreach has become almost non-existent or even unpopular. However, today we have many people, and maybe with justification, who feel our CMC congregations spend too much of their church budgets on local needs. They maintain that outreach, as symbolized by monies designated to conferences and specifically to the Commission on Overseas Mission, does not get enough support. Consequently, conference and mission board officials continually remind us of the financial shortfalls and the subsequent reduction of overseas personnel. They have been telling the ordinary persons in the pew that it is their fault that overseas work is decreasing. How should we, members in the pews, react? Must we continually feel guilty?

The world of the 1930s was vastly different from our world today. China, India, the Congo and the U.S. western plains were great mission fields. Many workers were required to preach the good news and plant churches. That work was successful. There are churches in India, China, Colombia, Taiwan, Japan, and these churches are anxious to reach out. Latin America is vibrant with its thousands of highly charismatic churches and leaders. They do not need many North

American workers. Also, Christians in our former mission fields are reaching out into the countries from where their missionaries came. North American cities are great mission fields. It is simple logic that fewer workers are needed in many areas of the world where churches are growing fast. It is not only a shortfall in funds and the abundance of good churches abroad which have reduced the number of foreign workers. Many areas of the world are closed to our missionaries, for example, India and China. That raises the question, Is the era of outreach ministries over?

Although the modern missionary era may be over, the time for missions is not past. Perhaps we need to discard some old wineskins. Jesus had to drive that truth home to the religious strongholds in his day and that truth has had to be underlined through the ages. Perhaps the William Carey-David Livingstone-Hudson Taylor approach to missions is not feasible in many parts of the world. Perhaps even the P. A Penner-Henry J. Brown approach and the era of mission stations with salaried overseas missionaries are over. In many regions of our globe the professional, salaried, western, white missionary is no longer needed nor wanted. That missionary has done his or her work. That movement had its strengths but it also had its weaknesses. Perhaps we pushed some of those weaknesses much too long.

During the early 1950s Ed J. Kaufman, the veteran missionary, statesman and educator, the former president of Bethel College, gave some lectures at Elim Bible School. I still recall his answer when he was asked what he would do if he were to go back to China. Part of his answer was, "I would leave the western culture, institutions and organizations back home in the United States and bring the people the simple message of the Scriptures. I would leave it up to the Chinese Christians to decide what institutions and organizations they would want to build into that message."

Although the Christian church must never cease to be the sending church according to the commands of Christ, it may have to do that in a different form. The Book of Acts tells about the great work of the apostles Peter and Paul. It also tells us that people everywhere shared the Word. Even faraway Rome received the Christian message through travelling business people. Probably most of the work was done by ordinary believers. There are no records which tell us Rome was evangelized by Paul or Peter.

A new avenue of service may be opening up for us through the concept of working in partnership with congregations in other coun-

tries. There are thousands of Asians in North America. Asian Christians from abroad may want to tie into congregations in North America to reach their own people in our cities. That may be the only avenue open after Hong Kong becomes part of China in 1997. North Americans may attempt this in the former Soviet Union. In our integration discussions with the Mennonite Church, new and different mission agencies may emerge. I trust that, with the development of different agencies, there also will be new approaches to share the news of Christ with those who have not yet been able to accept it.

Integration

Over several decades ongoing dialogue has taken place between representatives of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the (Old) Mennonite Church regarding joint programs. Already during the great famine of Russia in the 1920s, joint efforts were evident, mostly through MCC-related programs. Since the 1950s the two seminaries have worked on one campus and today are functioning under one president. Already in 1954 I worked with General Conference and Mennonite Church people on new Sunday School materials. Official and unofficial dialogue has continued and fully authorized joint committees are working on the merger of these conferences. The possibility is growing that by 1995 at a large joint conference session in Wichita, Kansas, the decision will be made to integrate the two bodies completely. This integration has been in process in many local congregations in the United States and in Ontario with the formation of the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada.

Mennonites in Manitoba have been less affected by this merger discussion because we have no (Old) Mennonite congregations. Nevertheless it will affect us since we are part of the Seminary and of the General Conference programs which will be affected by the merger. Many details regarding our Congregational Resources Board and the Commission on Home Ministries will have to be worked through. Major decisions will have to be made regarding the colleges in the U.S. To how many colleges will the newly formed body want to relate? How will integration affect Conrad Grebel College and Canadian Mennonite Bible College?

Even more important will be discussions regarding the mission boards of the two bodies. Will they continue to be U.S.-based? Will integration wipe out some agencies and create new ones? How will the

merger affect our binational work? The 49th parallel and its impact will remain. The American Revolution and Civil War set the United States into a different direction than Canada. Although we do not want to be nationalistic in the church, the fact remains that the political, social and financial make-up of our own country has been interwoven into our lives so thoroughly that no American and no Canadian can divorce himself or herself totally from the country of birth and/or residence. Therefore, it seems important that two parallel conferences emerge out of the integration discussion. Both conferences will need to have programs that meet the needs of their areas.

However, they also will need a well defined, acceptable parent body that continues to bridge the border and the differences which exist. That parent body, that General Conference of Mennonite conferences of North America, will be very important. Much discussion, much goodwill and foresight will be needed to decide which major programs will be placed under the umbrella of that parent body. Already in 1968 I was hopeful that the General Conference Mennonite Church of North America would become a conference of conferences, thus eliminating one level of membership.

The integration of the two large Mennonite bodies of North America may not be the best solution. I have often wondered whether it might not have been better to continue working cooperatively for a number of years and allowing integration to evolve much more slowly. I believe the anticipated merger will be costly because of duplication and overlapping. Also, it will be costly because of its size. Furthermore, smaller regions may be sidelined. The diversity of our lifestyles—family values, divorce, homosexuality, political and military involvements, acceptance of our respective countries' values—may place a strain on individual congregations and may result in large-scale withdrawals from the conferences. At the same time, I accept the inevitable that by 1995 the larger majority will vote for integration.

God's Call

Discovering God's will, whether for myself, my family, the church or the conferences, has been most interesting. Frequently I have found direction in the logical steps found in Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." But step number 2, "lean not on your own understanding," has not

always fit into that sequence as well as it might have. Very often I simply had to think things through, then take some very rational steps to move forward. I did that when I decided to write my first letter to Susan. There were times when I could not see my way through; for example when I consented to follow the Bergthaler Mennonite Church decision to send us to Mexico. Sometimes God used other people to open a door for the next move.

In 1949 the world looked rather dark to us. We had decided that we wanted to go back into a Latin American country to continue as foreign missionaries. At the same time we needed more training. The door to Grace Bible Institute and the University of Nebraska were closed by a letter from the U.S. Immigration Department telling us that they could not accommodate foreign students. It was then that Ernest Wiebe suggested that I go to CMBC. That step led to new horizons and an invitation to come to Altona for Bible school teaching, church ministries and Mission Board activities. Altona provided mountains of work for us but rather meagre food for our table during the first 12 years. Therefore, we were hoping to find a ministry that would support us more fully.

In 1953 C. C. Neufeld, chairman of church council at Bethel Mission Church, invited me to enter into discussions with them about full-time pastoral ministry in the church. I accepted the invitation to preach a trial sermon. After the sermon Neufeld told me the church council would meet to decide whether to recommend me to the congregation at the membership meeting. That was also the time when the Elim Bible School board was meeting to decide if we should continue at the Bible school. The evening before the Elim board meeting, Rev. Benjamin Ewert came to Altona. I met him at the train station. One of the first things Ewert said was, "Last night Bethel Mission decided to call Benno Toews as pastor." That was the information I had been waiting for. I felt somewhat disappointed and hurt that the church had not informed me personally.

Next morning I said "yes" to the Elim invitation. A few days later I received a letter from C.C. Neufeld inviting me for further discussion with Bethel about the pastoral position. Ewert had misunderstood what had happened. I was sorry but I could not go back on my commitment to Elim.

I have often wondered what we would have done if Bethel's call would have come one day earlier. Would I have had the courage to go against Schulz's wishes that I remain in Altona? Several times when

we later received other calls, Schulz would simply say, “You know where you belong—here in our church.”

The call to the Canadian Conference offices came years later when many things had changed. By then Altona had accepted the system of salaried pastoral leadership. I felt keenly that I could no longer offer the Altona congregation what many there expected. I also felt acutely that certain people felt I had overstayed my welcome after 21 years in Altona. Some in the church let it be known that they wished assistant minister, David F. Friesen would lead the church. I thought it was only right to let David use his many gifts without my standing in his path. I still believe it was the right thing to do.

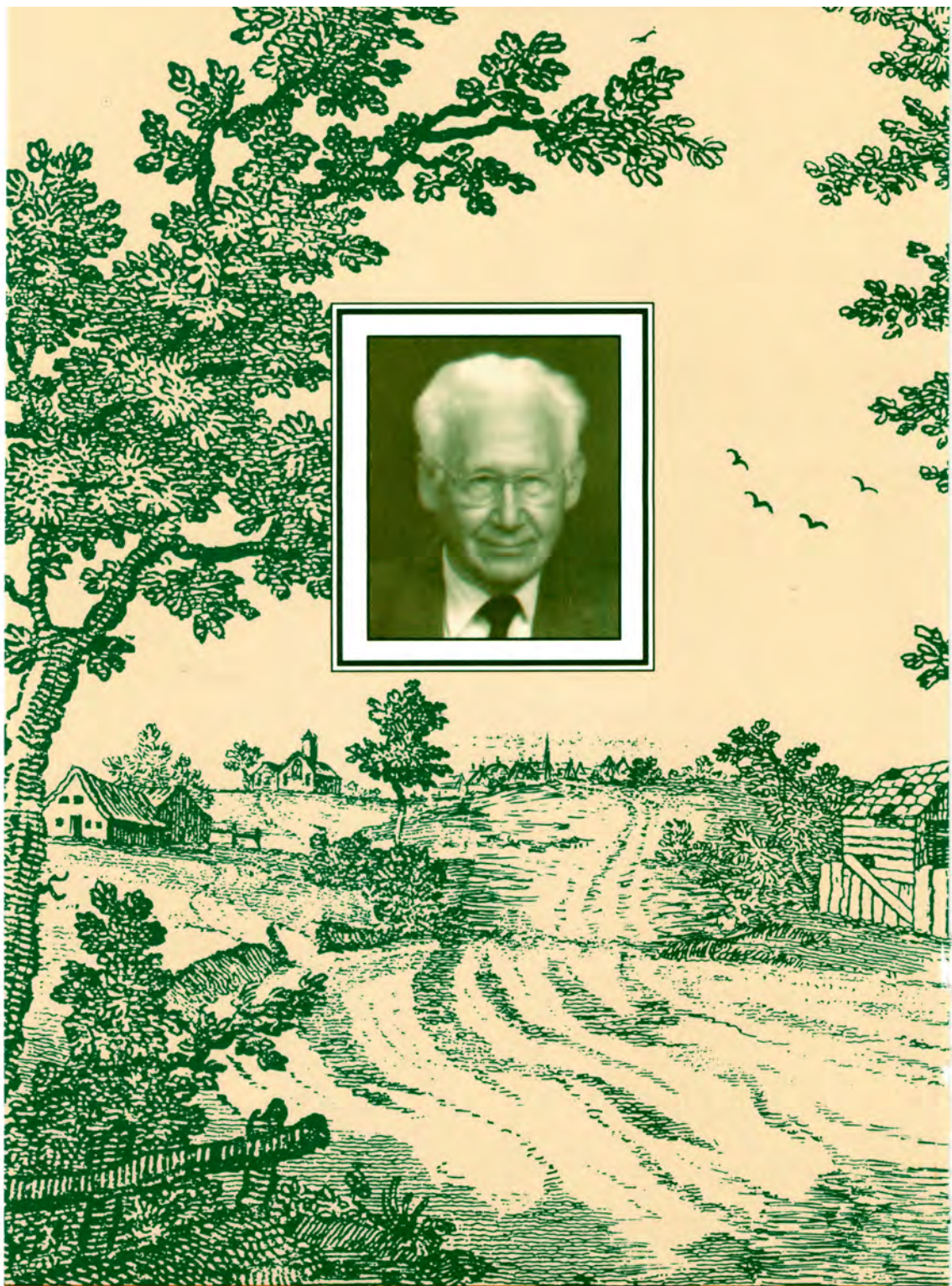
Over the years I have been involved with a variety of decisions in many boards and institutions. I am still convinced that the decision to dissolve the Southern Manitoba Crusade for Christ organization was the right one. That kind of mass evangelism had been tried, it had made its contributions, but now it had run its course. Evangelism should go back to the congregations. I recall an important decision when I was chairman of the CMBC board. The personnel committee of the board was looking for an assistant to George Wiebe in the music department. George had picked David Falk who, at that time, was teaching at Goshen College. During our studies in Elkhart I learned to know David and felt I could not support that move. He was too much like George. I could not see them working effectively together and thought George would be hurt badly if David came. I did not support the move. I am still glad I did. George continued to make a tremendous contribution to the College and the larger church community until his retirement in 1993.

I have felt good about our Conference decision to move into more aggressive evangelism and church planting. I helped organize a number of training sessions for people across Canada. Although we never achieved the lofty goals of resource people like George McGavran, Wynn Arn and Art McPhee, those men did challenge many of our ministers, deacons and lay people to be more aggressive in outreach ministries.

Earlier I reflected on my spiritual journey. That journey has taken many ups and downs and many unforeseen curves. But the basics have remained the same. I rejoice in the knowledge that God through Christ is my Saviour, Provider and Lord. I pray less in the sense that I put out the Gideon fleece. But certain times I have prayed for specific healing, guidance and insights. Susan and I have prayed consistently that our

children's and grandchildren's lives may be lived in relationship to God. We pray for guidance for them. But prayer for me is not only the specifics that I ask for. Prayer is more a relationship with God through which God reveals himself to me and becomes part of my daily existence. Instead of only asking God to change things, prayer changes me to fit into God's plan.

Recently I have had considerable difficulty with my eyes. During that crisis I frequently prayed for help and healing. God chose not to heal my eyes. I lost sight in my left eye. I still pray that if God so wills my other eye will be spared. But my prayer is also a commitment to follow as God leads. Although I hope I will not lose my sight completely, I trust that even if that should happen, I might be able to follow and in some way bring glory to Christ, my Lord and my Redeemer.



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