

*J. J. Thiessen*

A  
**Leader**  
for His Time

Esther Epp-Tiessen



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by  
Esther Epp-Tiessen

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## Acknowledgements

I never knew J.J. Thiessen personally. However, over the two years that I worked on his biography, I feel like I came to know him well. Indeed, as I scoured his letters and reports, pored over minutes of meetings he chaired, and interviewed his friends and acquaintances, J.J. became a friend. In my mind, I could see his eyes twinkle, feel his firm handshake and hear his warm greeting. Occasionally I became angry with him. Many times I longed to ask him questions. In the end, I developed a deep appreciation for his contribution to a faith community of which I also am a part. I feel privileged to have been entrusted with the task of writing J.J. Thiessen's story.

I am indebted to many individuals and organizations for their assistance in this undertaking.

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To all, I offer my heartfelt thanks.

Esther Epp-Tiessen  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
May 1, 2001

## Foreword

I was a young man when I first met Jacob Johann Thiessen at an Alberta youth retreat, ca. 1944. Five years later we were both at the annual sessions of the Conference of Mennonites in Coaldale, Alberta. Four years after that we met in an upstairs apartment at the seminary in Chicago, where he came with the request that I continue graduate studies with the view to joining the teaching faculty at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg. That encounter began a close relationship over many years when he was board chairman of the College.

For some time now it has been incumbent upon us that someone write JJ's story—a leader for his time. From before World War I, when he made his first contributions as a young teacher in the Mennonite village of Tiegenhagen, Russia, to his very significant role in helping thousands of his Mennonite kin emigrate from Russia to Canada, he made his mark. By age 30 he was known in Russian government circles, both in Moscow and in the local arena, and by Canadian immigration personnel and CPR representatives from the distant shores of the Western world.

Once he had emigrated to Canada with his family in 1926 he blossomed into the full-fledged person that he became: family provider, churchman, pastor, conference leader, college board chairman, student counsellor and friend. What follows his story.

To remember many conversations and experiences from our 35 years of acquaintanceship is to open a panorama of revealing windows into JJ's life and character. Few have learned a third language as well as did this Russian Mennonite. Few became aware of the suffering of the many for whom he became a constant helper, a Christian brother and a trusted friend.

JJ was afforded privileges in his work that were used to great advantage, as when the CPR Company granted him a free travel pass for the many years he served the immigration cause. And how significant it was that, during the many occasions of deliberation, of regulating financial issues relating to the *Reiseschuld* and of establishing policies for resettling immigrants from abroad, the CPR and government officials would ask Rev. Thiessen to lead them in an opening prayer. Furthermore, his keen insight into very difficult issues often helped to resolve stalemates, clear up misunderstandings and set the stage for further positive relationships.

Amid all his responsibilities he seemed to be tireless. When travelling with him I noted that, once were settled in our seats, he was asleep even before the plane took off. When asked how he was able to do this, the answer was simple: "I tell myself, 'Jacob, here's your chance for a nap. Take it!'" The opportunities for these ventures came often and he used them to full advantage.

As a recognition of his many contributions to our Mennonite people, in 1955 Bethany Biblical Seminary conferred on J.J. Thiessen the Doctor of Divinity degree. And for the same reason, in 1972 Canadian Mennonite Bible College and Faculty published an anthology of essays "dedicated to Rev. Dr. J.J. Thiessen for leading a people, and Mrs. J.J. Thiessen for inspiring a leader."

Now Esther Epp-Tiessen has written the long-overdue biography of this leader. The story of JJ comes to life as memoirs, correspondence, archival treasures, interviews, papers and broader historical accounts supply the information. As the story unfolds it becomes clear why the Mennonite community has become so appreciative of and owes such a debt of gratitude for what this bold leader has contributed to its well-being in so many ways.

Epp-Tiessen has used her sources to good advantage. We note how JJ's teachers left their positive influence on life and practice. "Candid camera" flashes enliven the story. For the historian there will be many vignettes or references which will spark the interest for further investigation; for example, Peter Braun, the singing teacher in Halbstadt, whose unique role in the unfolding of the history of Mennonite colonies is assured by his "amazing collection of archival material relating to the history of the Molotschna colony." And what is so commendable, Epp-Tiessen has appropriately woven the personal experiences of JJ into the larger political and social developments, both on the Russian and the Canadian scene.

Our deep appreciation goes to Esther Epp-Tiessen for a book which opens new vistas and gives to the reader a wealth of information that provides the occasion for conversation as the Mennonite story continues to unfold.

Henry Poettcker  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
*May 10, 2001*

# 1

1893–1907

## Beginnings

On August 31, 1893 in the village of Klippenfeld, Molotschna colony in southern Russia, Jacob Johann Thiessen was born to Johann and Margareta Neufeld Thiessen. He was the third child in what would become a family of nine children. According to a story told by Margareta Thiessen to her son Jacob years later, the mid-wife attending the birth made a significant prediction. When the tiny baby emerged and began to wail, she supposedly said, “Mrs. Thiessen, you can’t expect much from this child; at best he might become a schoolteacher.”<sup>1</sup>

Apparently Johann Thiessen was not too pleased with the mid-wife’s prediction. Like most men in the Mennonite colonies of southern Russia, he was a farmer and needed able-bodied sons to assist him with the farm work. He and Margareta already had one 18-month-old son, Johann, in addition to three-year-old daughter Sarah. But father Johann looked forward to the day when there would be several sons to help him with the labour on the land. Unfortunately for him, the mid-wife’s prediction would prove true.

### Family

Jacob’s earliest memory was of his mother Margareta when he was about four years old. She was weeping very hard, for a reason unknown to her young son. When he tried to comfort her, she invited him and the other children to join her at the kitchen bench where they knelt and prayed for a long time. The words of that prayer were lost to Jacob, but the image of his beloved mother, filled with grief but also deep faith, left a profound impression on him.<sup>2</sup>

Margareta Neufeld Thiessen was born on November 22, 1869 to Klippenfeld pioneers Johann and Sara Janzen Neufeld. The Neufelds were from the villages of Sparrau and Pastva, respectively, on the eastern edge of the Molotschna colony. They had moved to Klippenfeld soon after its founding in 1863 because they needed land. Margareta was the oldest daughter of seven children. When she was only 14, her mother died as a result of severe burns sustained while lighting a kerosene lamp. Margareta thus became the homemaker and caregiver for her siblings, the

youngest of whom was an infant.<sup>3</sup> Soon thereafter, her father married a woman only somewhat older than Margareta herself. The relationship between stepmother and stepdaughter was not a happy one. Despite her tragic loss—or perhaps because of it—Margareta became a woman of deep and pious faith.

Margareta married Johann Thiessen around 1889. Johann's parents, like her own, were also among the first inhabitants of Klippenfeld. They were Johann Thiessen, Sr., and Sarah Walde Kornelsen, originally from the village of Pordenau. Somewhat older than Johann, Sr., Sarah was a widow with two living children; two other children had died. They were married in 1857 and moved to Klippenfeld in 1863, the year it was established. Their son Johann, Jr., Jacob Thiessen's father, was born in 1864, one of the first children born in the new village.

Margareta Neufeld and Johann Thiessen, both born and raised in Klippenfeld, were about five years apart in age but undoubtedly knew one another and probably attended school together. The precise date of their marriage is unknown, but it was likely 1889. In addition to Sarah (b. 1890), Johann (b. 1892) and Jacob (b. 1893), there were eventually six other children in the family: Gerhard (b. 1897), Helena (b. 1900), Margareta (b. 1902), Maria (b. 1905), Tina (b. 1907) and Abram (b. 1912).<sup>4</sup>

For the very young Jacob—or “Jasch” as he was called—life revolved around his family, particularly his mother whose domain was the home and the garden. He watched her cook large pots of soup on the huge brick stove and bake countless batches of *Zwieback* (double rolls) and *Platz* (pastry with fruit) in its deep glowing oven. He sat at her feet as she spun yarn from sheep's wool, knit warm socks for her family or sewed at her treadle machine. If he had been a girl, she would have taught him to do these things as well but, because there was a clear and gendered division of labour in Russian Mennonite homes, Jacob simply observed. She did teach him how to gather eggs, turn the butter churn, carry in wood for the brick stove and feed mulberry leaves to the silkworms. From an early age Jacob was drawn into the work of the home and farm.

In the Russian Mennonite colony world, mothers were the ones who nurtured the spiritual life of young children. To be sure, it was the father who read the Bible and spoke the prayer when the family gathered for meals, but it was the mother who told little children simple Bible stories, taught them religious songs and verses, and helped them say their first rudimentary prayers.<sup>5</sup> As a devout and pious woman, Margareta did all these things. Jacob often observed her kneel in prayer at the kitchen bench and fast on special holy days. On Palm Sunday she collected reeds from the river bank and hung them about the house to commemorate



*Jacob Thiessen's parents,  
Margareta Neufeld (1869–  
1921) & Johann Thiessen  
(1864–1928).*

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. If there happened not to be a community worship service on a particular Sunday, she gathered the family together in the *Grosse Stube* (parlour) for scripture reading, singing and prayer.<sup>6</sup>

Margareta was also known to visit and care for the sick in the village, attending to their spiritual and physical needs. On one occasion the husband of a desperately ill woman asked Margareta to come and pray with his wife, since she was unsure of her salvation and was afraid to die. Since there was no resident minister in the village, Margareta took off her apron, washed her face and hands, combed her hair and went. She returned some hours later, reporting that the woman was now at peace.<sup>7</sup> Jacob listened intently to his parents' conversations after such visits.

More than anything, Margareta taught her son Jacob about love. To convey her love for him, perhaps she held him close when he was weary, wiped his tears when he was sad or hurt, offered him a hot *Zwieback*, or simply lifted her eyes from her work to listen to his stories and to smile. We know that for Jacob, his mother imparted comfort, warmth, tenderness and unconditional love. One of the things that meant most to him, later on, was that his mother supported him in his desire to be a teacher.

When he reached the age of six, Jacob began to spend more time with his father Johann on the farm. As a boy, it was important for him to learn the things that boys and men did. In the Russian Mennonite community, just as mothers represented love, fathers depicted strength, discipline and authority, as well as emotional restraint. Although Johann loved his

children, and they knew that, he had been raised to cherish hard work, thrift and honesty, and saw his primary role as a father to pass on those values and to discipline the children when their behaviour contravened them. He was a strict man who used the strap as a form of discipline. It was not for him to dry a tear or offer a warm hug when one of the children was upset. The expression of feelings and demonstration of affection were generally not part of the emotional repertoire of fathers.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, and perhaps because Johann was a quiet man of few words, the bond between father and son was not nearly as close as the one between mother and son. As he grew older, he would nevertheless learn some important lessons from his father.<sup>9</sup>

We know very little about Jacob's relationship with his siblings. His older brother, Johann, was both a playmate and a rival. Jacob likely slept with him in the traditional sleeping bench—bed by night and bench by day—and played tag or hide-and-seek in and around the farmyard. A common pastime for Molotschna children was hoop-rolling; perhaps the Thiessen children also enjoyed this game, running alongside an iron hoop (from a wagon wheel or barrel) that they propelled with a wooden stick. A favourite childhood activity for Johann and his friends, but one which disgusted Jacob, was killing snakes. Memoirs which Jacob wrote later in life do not mention the younger siblings, which suggests that Jacob played less with them. The youngest two were born after 1907 when he had already left home to study so he did not know them as well.

Besides mother, father, sisters and brothers, Jacob's family also included two large extended families (the Thiessens and the Neufelds), with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Most of these relatives lived in Klippenfeld—indeed, the populations of most Mennonite villages consisted of a number of extended families. But there were also relatives scattered throughout the colony. From time to time Jacob's family hitched the horses to their buggy and drove off to Tiegenhagen to the west to visit Jacob and Helena Kornelsen. Jacob Kornelsen was a half-brother to Johann Thiessen. More often, the family spent a leisurely Sunday afternoon with members of the clan in Klippenfeld. These Sunday afternoon gatherings were the highlight of the week. Typically, the men visited in the shade of the orchard or in the *Grosse Stube* (parlour), the women prepared a light meal called *Faspa*, the young people gathered at the river's edge and the children played.

For the first years of Jacob's life, his Thiessen grandparents lived in the *Sommer Stube* (summer room) at the back of the house. The house and farmstead had originally been theirs, but Jacob's parents had assumed ownership some time after their marriage. The grandparents had then moved from the front of the house to the *Sommer Stube*. It was not

uncommon for several generations to live together in the same house—either married children or elderly parents occupied the *Sommer Stube* or even the *Nebenhaus* (a small dwelling built onto the main dwelling). Unfortunately, Grandmother and Grandfather Thiessen died in 1897 and 1898, respectively, before Jacob reached the age of five so he retained few memories of them.

Grandfather Neufeld, on the other hand, became a very important person in Jacob's life. He was a warm and good-natured man who loved to surround himself with the children and grandchildren from his two marriages. Each year on Grandfather Neufeld's birthday in June, the large extended family gathered around the table to honour him. (Birthday celebrations were held for the elderly rather than for the young.) On such occasions, Jacob noted the tears of joy and gratitude that flowed down his grandfather's cheeks.

Jacob's character was very much shaped by his early family life, particularly by the influence of his parents. Where his cheerful outlook and optimistic spirit originated is unknown—perhaps from Grandfather Neufeld. Or perhaps it was simply a childhood that was peaceful and secure. Although Jacob heard plenty of stories about the difficult times of the pioneer years, his family lived comfortably. And although death was a frequent visitor to Mennonite homes, he experienced no traumatic loss as a child. As a young boy, Jacob's experience of family taught him that the world was a place where he could feel secure.

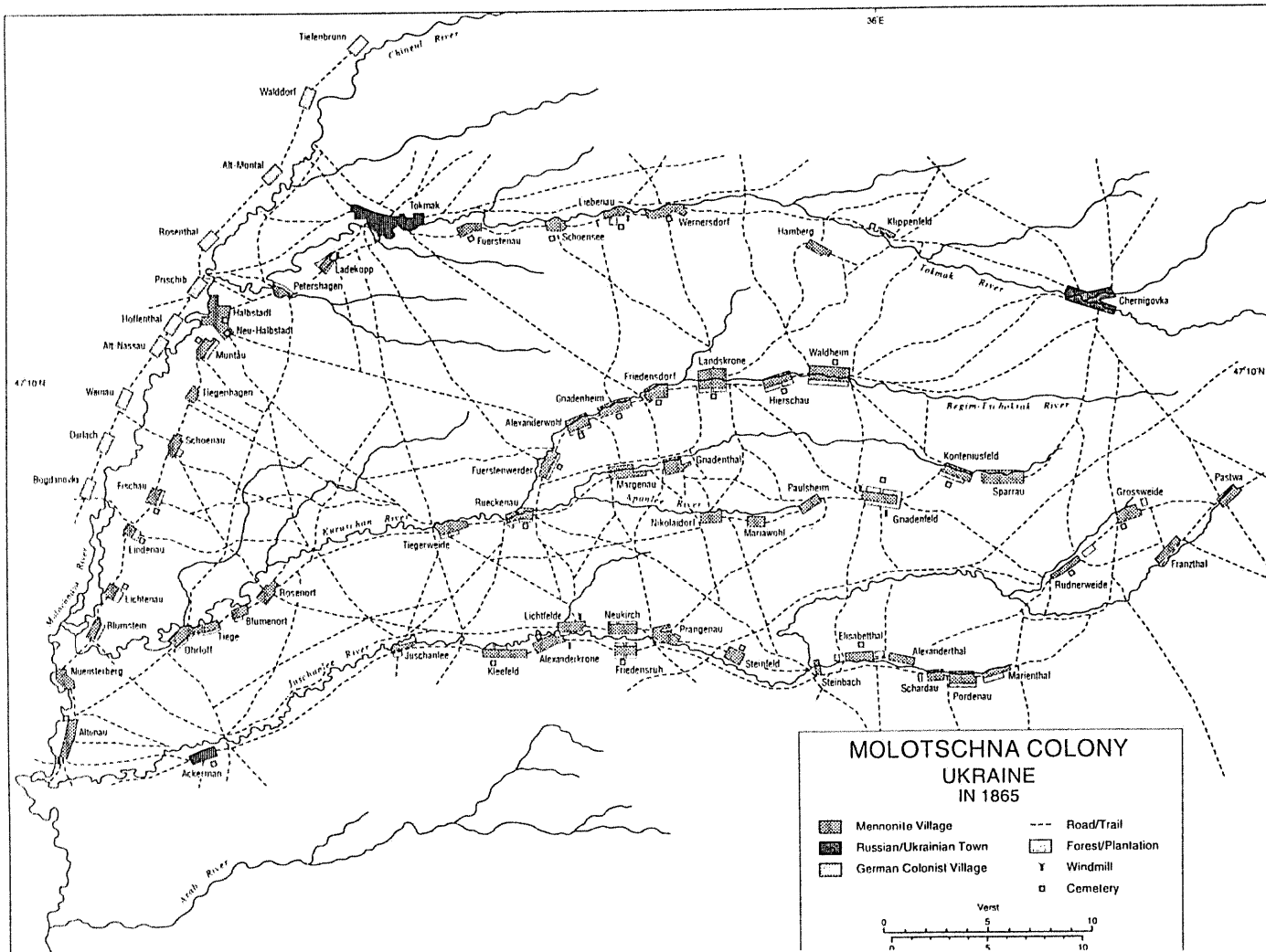
### **Farm**

Jacob's family life was intimately connected to the world of farming. A symbol of this close relationship was the way in which house and barn were attached to one another. A short passageway leading off the pantry at the back of the house led directly into the barn. Almost all families in Klippenfeld lived in similar house-barn combinations.

One reason Mennonites had come to live in southern Russia was because they were farmers. In the 1780s Tsarina Catherine II had sent an emissary to Europe to find peoples who would be willing to settle and cultivate lands that she had recently acquired from the Ottoman Empire. Mennonites living in Prussia were among those who decided to take up her offer of economic incentives and religious freedoms. Beginning in 1789 the first group of families had established an agricultural colony called Chortitza on the Dniepr River in the province of Ekaterinoslav.

The Molotschna settlement in the province of Taurida was founded in 1804 by a later group of Prussian Mennonite immigrants. The colony consisted of a 120,000-dessiatin tract of land (one dessiatin equals 2.7 acres or 1.00925 hectares) bounded on the west by the meandering Mol-





ochnaia River. From the river's edge, the land rose gently eastward in a grass-covered treeless steppe. In due time this land proved to be very fertile and produced great quantities of grain. Eventually 60 agricultural villages were established.

Initially, all immigrant families were granted 65 dessiatins of land, a generous amount similar to what homesteaders in the Canadian and American west received. However, the government stipulated that these farms were not to be sub-divided but could only be passed on intact to one child, usually the youngest son, who was expected to make financial compensation to his siblings. Despite provisions made for future population growth through the allocation of "surplus" land, Molotschna had a large number of "landless" families (*Anwohmer*) only a few decades after it had been founded. These folk lived on the edges of the villages, where they possessed tiny garden plots and eked out a living by renting land (often far from where they lived) or hiring themselves out to landed farmers. There was growing social tension as the numbers of landless grew and as a minority of landowners amassed great wealth. By 1860, over 60 percent of the Molotschna population was without land and the situation had reached a crisis point. Eventually the Russian government intervened and several reforms were instituted. Full farms of 65 dessiatins could now be divided into half farms or "small" farms, the latter consisting of roughly 16 dessiatins. The remaining colony-owned land was distributed among the landless. In addition, a fund was created for the purchase of new land and the establishment of new colonies. Although not resolving the land problem, these measures provided some relief.<sup>10</sup>

It was in this context that Klippenfeld village, along with nearby Hamberg, was founded in 1863. The two villages were the last ones to be established in the Molotschna colony, and many of their pioneer settlers were landless families from elsewhere within the colony. Jacob's grandparents, the Thiessens and the Neufelds, were among the young landless couples who acquired their first farms in Klippenfeld.

As the youngest son in his family, Jacob's father Johann took over the Thiessen farm, likely a "full" farm, within a few years of his marriage. It is doubtful that Johann would have been elected mayor if he had not owned a good-sized farm, nor that he could have afforded the improvements that he made on the farm. He replaced the old thatched roofs on the house and barn with tiles and the stone walls with brick. He built a shed for the wagons and implements. He even invested in some of the newer farm machinery becoming available, including a mower reaper and a threshing machine. Despite the fact that the land in the Klippenfeld area was more stony than elsewhere, the Thiessens made a fairly good living for themselves, raising sheep and growing red winter wheat.



*A typical Russian Mennonite house-barn with thatched roof. In their home in Klippenfeld Jacob's father was able to replace the thatched roof with tiles and the stone walls with bricks. Photo: MHCA*

During his pre-school years, Jacob's experience of farm life was mostly restricted to the farmyard—the barn, the garden and the orchard which were all near the house. But as he approached school age, his father took him to the more distant pasture and the cultivated fields. According to the pattern begun at the founding of the Mennonite colonies, the land owned by farm families was pooled and then redistributed in such a way that each family received a farmstead, a portion of common land, and its own fields perhaps in various locations. This system allowed families to live close together within the village centre and travel comparable distances to fields of comparable quality. Usually, there was a common pasture, where all the village cattle or sheep were cared for by a village shepherd, also common hayland and often-times a common watermelon patch. (The Mennonites ate watermelon with fritters called *Rollkuchen*, made watermelon syrup and fed watermelon to their animals.)

When he was six years old, Jacob was given the responsibility of caring for the family's herd of sheep which meant spending the day with them in the pasture outside the village. He did not enjoy this job. The village dogs kept appearing and disturbing the sheep. As much as he ran

and shouted and waved his arms, he could not chase them away. Besides that, he was much too lonely. He was a sociable boy who preferred to be with people rather than with sheep. Even so, he did feel a twinge of sadness when his father sold the sheep a short time later.

At age 7, Jacob joined his father in the fields and assisted as much as a small slight boy could with the ploughing, seeding and harvesting. Sometimes Jacob felt proud and grown up when he helped in the fields, for instance when a piece of the mower broke and his father sent him to the blacksmith shop alone on the horse to get the piece repaired. Other times, he disliked the field work as much as watching the sheep. A close call with the mower did not help matters. One day when he and his father were cutting hay a severe hailstorm struck. In the midst of the storm, Jacob fell off the horse and tumbled into the path of the blade. His father's presence of mind and swift action in pulling Jacob out of the way prevented a serious accident.

### **Village**

Beyond home and farm, Jacob's life evolved in the context of the village. The most distinguishing feature of the Klippenfeld village, like virtually all Mennonite villages, was its wide street. It was lined on either side with broad acacia trees that offered pleasant shade in the summer months. When Jacob stepped out of the gate of his front yard, he stood on the village street, the focal point for much community activity. Down the street the village herdsman led the cattle to pasture each morning and farmers took the horses and implements off to the fields. There women stopped to chat, children played and young people lingered on warm summer evenings.

On either side of the street the farmyards were neatly laid out in a uniform pattern behind white fences. Each yard had fruit orchards and flower beds in front, house-barns next and vegetable gardens in the back. Beyond the farmsteads on the north side of the street was a common woodlot. Past farmsteads on the south side was the Tokmak River, a small tributary which ran westward toward the Molochnaia River. Klippenfeld had very few businesses: just a small general store, a blacksmith shop and perhaps one or two other shops. A water-powered mill, two windmills and two tread mills were located just outside the village. The mills ground wheat and rye into flour and barley into grist for horses, cows and pigs. The village school occupied a conspicuous spot in the centre of the village.

The population of Klippenfeld in the year 1900 is unknown. By 1869, approximately 40 families (occupying 27 full-farms and 14 small-farms) had already made the village their home.<sup>11</sup> By 1874 the school attendance

record listed 70 students.<sup>12</sup> At the turn of the century, the school population stood at about 50. Most likely, about 200 people lived in Klippenfeld during Jacob's childhood. Virtually all of them, like the Thiessens, were Mennonites.

As a boy, Jacob probably learned some things about village organization as a result of his father serving as mayor (*Oberschulz*) for a time. The mayor was elected by representatives of all land-owning families—usually men, but also widows. (Married women, with land or without, and landless men did not have voting rights.) The mayor oversaw all local affairs such as engaging the school teacher, securing a night watchman, maintaining roads and common pasture lands, and negotiating agreements on crop rotation.<sup>13</sup> Jacob may not have known a great deal about his father's duties, but he certainly was aware of the regular meetings father Johann led in the village schoolhouse and the occasional trips he made to Gnadenfeld as Klippenfeld representative on the municipal assembly. Gnadenfeld was the administrative centre for villages in the eastern half of the Molotschna colony, while Halbstadt served the west.

### **School**

Jacob yearned for the day when he could attend school. On a number of occasions his parents allowed him to accompany his older sister Sarah and brother Johann to school. But it was only after his seventh birthday in 1900 that he was eligible to attend as a regular student. When the day finally arrived, he was ecstatic. He was so eager to begin his life in the classroom that he could hardly eat his breakfast. Before he ran out the door, his mother carefully inspected his face, neck, hands and feet to ensure that he was clean enough for school.

The Klippenfeld schoolhouse stood on the south side of the street in the middle of the village. A small teacherage was attached to one end of the school and a large yard and play area surrounded the entire building. It consisted of a single classroom with a high ceiling, white walls and large windows. (All of these features maximized the light in the room since there was no electricity.) Students sat together on long benches and shared a long desk. They were grouped according to class, with the youngest children at the front and the oldest at the back, girls on one side of the room and boys on the other. To Jacob's great chagrin, he discovered on his first day of school that his class of beginners consisted of himself and five girls. He had already learned that associating with girls was something to be avoided.

Education was important among Mennonites. All children were expected to attend the village school, girls from age seven until 12 and boys

from seven until 14. By the time students completed school, they were to be literate in German and Russian, to know the basics of mathematics, geography, science and Russian history, and have a solid grounding in the Bible and the Mennonite catechism. Educational standards and levels of literacy among the Mennonites were much higher than among their Russian neighbours. Even so, by modern-day standards the schools had few educational resources, libraries were poor or non-existent, and school supplies consisted largely of slate and chalk.

The educational system in Mennonite colonies had already undergone significant change since the original settlers had been promised complete freedom in the establishment and operation of schools.<sup>14</sup> Beginning in 1881 the administration of schools came under the government's Department of Public Instruction. Several important changes came into effect. First of all, teachers were certified and appointed by the state, even though they were paid by the village. Secondly, where the school population exceeded 50 and necessitated hiring an additional teacher, the second one was to be an ethnic Russian rather than a Mennonite. Thirdly, a significant portion of the curriculum was taught in the Russian language—prior to this, Mennonite schools had functioned exclusively in High German.

Despite these changes, Mennonite village schools still played an important role in passing on the faith and the values of the community. The fact that the schoolhouse often doubled as a place of worship, and that teachers often served as ministers, were vivid symbols of how the school was an extension of the church. Indeed, in addition to the home, the village school was the place where children received their basic religious formation and where they learned High German, the language of worship and faith—the language of the home was Low German.

Jacob's day at school began, as it did at home, with devotions. Teacher Johann Fast opened each day by reading a Bible story, leading a hymn and offering a prayer. The first hour of formal study was then devoted to systematic instruction in the stories of the Bible, beginning with the creation story and ending with Revelation.<sup>15</sup> During the last several years of village school, the study of the Bible was incorporated into the teaching of the Mennonite catechism.

The catechism provided a basic overview of Mennonite doctrine and belief in question-and-answer format. The particular catechism used in Klippenfeld was likely a version of the Elbing Catechism, which was first published in Elbing, Prussia, in 1783 and was reprinted many times in Russia and also adapted for children. The point of studying the catechism was to ground students in the teachings of the church and the biblical texts upon which they were based. Knowledge of these things was a pre-



*The teacher and students of the Klippenfeld village school, ca. 1900. Jacob is second from left in the last row.*

requisite for baptism, something that usually happened in the late teens or early twenties. Like all students, Jacob was expected to memorize all the questions and answers of the catechism.

At school, Jacob also learned both High German and Russian. (Religious instruction and German language were conducted in German; arithmetic, science, geography and Russian history and literature in Russian.) Neither were totally unfamiliar to him. From the time he was a small boy, he had heard High German when his parents read from the Bible or prayed or when he accompanied them to worship on Sunday. He had learned Ukrainian from a young girl who helped look after him and his siblings. Ukrainian, sometimes referred to as Little Russian, was different from yet quite similar to the formal Russian taught in school. Jacob's own aptitude, combined with this early exposure, helped him to learn the two languages with ease.

There was strict discipline at school. Jacob quickly learned that he must sit still and perfectly straight, and be absolutely quiet. He could only speak if he was addressed by the teacher or if he raised his hand to answer a question.<sup>16</sup> Usually, a look or a sharp word from the teacher was the only thing needed to end any classroom disruptions, but teachers did resort to corporal punishment if things got out of hand. Jacob's first teacher, Johann Fast, did not hesitate to use his pointer for discipline purposes. Each Monday morning he demanded to know who had been smoking over the weekend. There was no sense in lying, for there were few secrets in Klippenfeld and Fast already knew who the guilty parties were. The poor souls were then called forward to receive a thrashing. Jacob's little body shook with terror as he witnessed this harsh punishment. However, experiences such as these did not dampen Jacob's enthusiasm for school.

After the third year, Fast was replaced by Abram J. Pankratz who was a much more congenial man and became well loved in the community as a teacher, neighbour and friend. Jacob grew very fond of Pankratz. He had one weakness; he could not sing, so he played a melody on an accordion and then encouraged his students to imitate it. Evidently the Klippenfeld school choir did not measure up to the standards of other village schools in those days.

The highlight of the school year was the annual Christmas Eve program. Teacher and students spent weeks eagerly preparing for this special event by labouring many hours to memorize a verse or *Wunsch* (wish) and to write it out on specially decorated paper in his or her best penmanship. (The cards were to be given to parents as Christmas gifts.) Excitement grew as the children practised their carols and transformed their generally drab schoolhouse into a place of magic and wonder. Some



years there was even a real candle-lit Christmas tree. On Christmas Eve the entire community, from youngest to oldest, squeezed into the crowded school for the long-awaited program. Even the crustiest old men were often moved to tears by the voices of the young and innocent proclaiming the birth of Jesus through verse and song. The wonderful evening ended with the singing of “Stille Nacht” (Silent Night) and the distribution of bags of nuts and sweets to all the children.<sup>17</sup>

Another highlight was the springtime excursion to the Rempel estate not far from Klippenfeld. The estate buildings were long gone. The large mansion of Mr. Rempel had been struck by lightning, so the story went, and burned to the ground some years earlier with only three walls remaining. Even if there was not much to see, these visits introduced Jacob to the reality of the Mennonite estate and the wealth it represented.

Jacob was a very bright student. He had an astonishing capacity to retain information and, because so much learning took place by memorization, his abilities enabled him to excel academically. During these early years he committed to memory hundreds of poems, verses and songs, which he would freely quote the rest of his life. Because of his academic giftedness, Jacob did not always find his studies challenging and was frequently bored. From time to time, Teacher Pankratz gave him the work of a more advanced class, but this was interpreted by other students as favouritism so Pankratz stopped the practice. On one occasion, when Jacob overheard Pankratz comment to his grandfather Neufeld, “We can expect something from this boy,”<sup>18</sup> he was encouraged to work harder than ever.

The last day of each school year was examination day. It was a festive occasion when parents and other villagers gathered at the school to witness the children demonstrate the knowledge they had gained over the course of the year. Students presented recitations and songs, answered questions posed by the teacher about their lesson materials, and displayed their best written work for all to see. The spirit was much like that of a year-end party. A more intimidating and gruelling experience was the special district examinations for graduating students who were subjected to a lengthy written exam, as well as an in-depth oral examination by a panel of judges including the church *Ältester* (bishop), the Russian school inspector and other officials. The *Ältester* quizzed students on the religious curriculum, while the other judges asked questions on the other subject areas.<sup>19</sup> Students were aware that their performance was a reflection of the teacher’s standards so the pressure to do well was great indeed. Jacob took his final exams in the village of Landskrone in 1907 at the age of 13. Although we do not know the results of his exams, it is safe to assume that he performed very well.

## Church

For a young boy growing up in a religious Mennonite community, the church was not a highly “visible” institution. Klippenfeld had neither a minister nor a special church building—two identifiable symbols of the church. A number of times the villagers encouraged Jacob’s father to allow his name to stand as a candidate for ministry, but he always declined. He felt he lacked the speaking skills necessary for preaching.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the Klippenfeld community was served by visiting ministers and not even every Sunday. Worship services, held in the village school, consisted of singing led by a local songleader, scripture reading, prayers and usually two sermons. Since most of the ministers had little education, they often simply read sermons that others had written.

Jacob’s mother Margareta insisted that her children attend worship on a regular basis. This was somewhat unusual; in many families it was assumed that the Sunday gathering was intended more for adults. It was felt that as long as parents attended to spiritual nurture in the home and teachers provided religious instruction in school, children were receiving a sufficient upbringing in the faith. We do not know how Jacob felt about attending worship, but it must have been challenging for a small boy to sit quietly and perfectly still while the minister’s voice seemed to drone on and on.

For Jacob Thiessen, “church” was not really associated with a particular building, or a particular individual (the minister) or even Sunday morning worship. All of life—family, community, school—was informed by the church and its teachings. The church—or, more accurately, the faith which it sought to instill and to nurture—was the foundation upon which the rest of life was built. As a child, Jacob likely would have difficulty identifying what was “church” simply because its influence extended into nearly every aspect of life as he knew it.

But what was the Mennonite church and what did it stand for? The Mennonites traced their roots to the Anabaptist movement which had emerged in Holland and Switzerland in the 16th century as an outgrowth of the Protestant Reformation. (Mennonites in Russia were descended from the Dutch wing of the movement.) Like Protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, early Anabaptist leaders saw a need for major change in the Roman Church. But they broke with the Protestants on a number of issues. One central conviction was that the true church was the community of believers who had voluntarily chosen to commit their lives to Jesus Christ. Hence, membership in the church was not synonymous with membership in the community, as it was for both Catholics and Protestant reformers. This conviction led Anabaptists to practise believers’ (or adult) baptism, as opposed to infant baptism. They also

believed that Christ's life and teachings required that they live non-violently and not take up arms, not even in self-defence or defence of the state.

Because adult baptism was against the law and considered a great threat to the state-church alliances both within Protestant- and Catholic-controlled regions of Europe, the Anabaptists experienced terrible persecution. Soon known as Mennonites, after the gifted Dutch leader Menno Simons, hundreds of leaders and faithful followers were arrested, tortured and killed if they refused to recant their beliefs. Many Mennonites fled to regions of Poland (later part of Prussia), where they could practise believers' baptism, worship freely and were exempted from military service. However, by the late 1700s militaristic Prussian kings were exacting high taxes from Mennonites and placing restrictions on Mennonite purchases of land because of the refusal to bear arms. The invitation from Tsarina Catherine II to help populate southern Russia could not have come at a better time for the Mennonites. Along with her offer of free land came the assurance that Mennonites could practise their religion freely and be exempt from military obligations. The only restriction was that they were not to proselytize among Russian Orthodox Christians.

Theoretically, Mennonites in Russia continued to hold the basic convictions of their Anabaptist forebears. However, as a result of their living in closed and relatively isolated communities, some shifts took place. For instance, although formal church membership was still based on believers' baptism, it was generally understood and expected that all young people would eventually be baptized in their late teens. Where Mennonites lived almost exclusively among other Mennonites, the element of free choice had lost much of its power. Membership in church and community were thus virtually synonymous. Being "Mennonite" was associated more with the fact that a person was born into the colony world and less with his or her voluntary commitment to the faith.

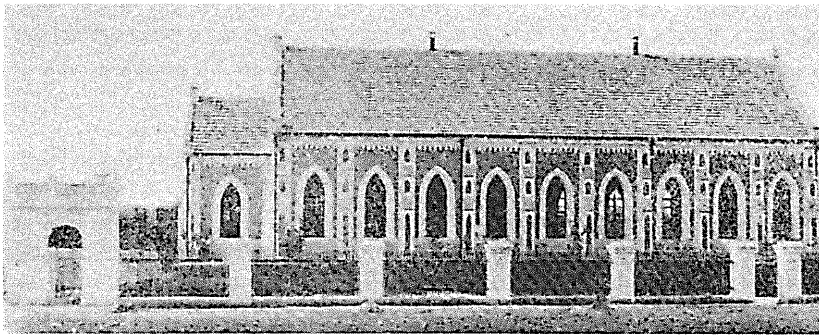
The formation of the Mennonite Brethren church in 1860 was in many ways a reaction to this "cultural Mennonitism." Influenced by German Pietism, the founders of the Mennonite Brethren Church emphasized a personal conversion experience, baptism by immersion (as opposed to sprinkling or pouring), and avoidance of practices such as smoking and drinking. Initially there were tremendous tensions between the Mennonite Brethren and the *kirchliche* (Old Church), as the more traditional group became known. By the early 1900s relationships were much more cordial.

Around 1910 there were nine *kirchliche* congregations in Molotschna with a total of 14 church buildings. The Mennonite Brethren had one

congregation, based at Rueckenau, with five additional meeting places.<sup>21</sup> Each congregation was led by a number of unpaid elected ministers and one elected *Ältester* (bishop). The role of the minister was to preach, to perform funerals and weddings, to serve as a spiritual counsellor and to prepare young people for baptism. Only the *Ältester* could officiate at baptismal ceremonies and communion observances (celebrations of the Lord's Supper).

The people of Klippenfeld were members of the *kirchliche* congregation at Schoensee, some 20 kilometres to the west.<sup>22</sup> Lay ministers from Schoensee travelled to Klippenfeld to preach and lead worship in the school building. Likewise, the Schoensee *Ältester* appeared once a year to perform baptism and perhaps on one other occasion to serve communion. Presumably, some of the Klippenfeld folk made the journey to Schoensee from time to time to worship there. Around 1910, it seems that Klippenfeld came under the jurisdiction of the newly organized Landskrone congregation.<sup>23</sup> Landskrone, to the southwest, was somewhat closer than Schoensee.

Clearly Jacob Thiessen had a very religious upbringing but it is difficult to ascertain just what he learned during his early life about Anabaptist theology and history and about the beliefs of the Mennonite church in Russia. This much we can surmise. As a boy, he knew that he would be encouraged to make his own faith commitment and join the church later in his teens. Almost certainly he witnessed several baptismal ceremonies while he was growing up and understood that one day he would be encouraged to request baptism too. If some of his peers regarded baptism as simply a rite of passage that accompanied the transition to adulthood, Jacob's mother had taught him that a personal and vital faith was essential. When a young friend of his was ill, Jacob



*The Schoensee Mennonite meeting house, located 20 kilometres west of Klippenfeld. Residents of Klippenfeld were members of the Schoensee congregation. Photo: MHCA*

felt an inner compulsion to do what he had witnessed his mother do: visit that friend and ensure that he had surrendered his life to his Creator.<sup>24</sup> He understood, at least intuitively, that salvation resulted from faith, and faith involved personal decision and commitment.

When Jacob was 12 years old, a particular incident gave him an important lesson about Mennonite non-participation in war. It was 1905 and Russia was embroiled in a war against Japan. According to Jacob's memoirs, his mayor father was investigated by the military authorities for his refusal to display war-related propaganda. Johann was summoned to the village of Wernersdorf for interrogation. As he prepared to make the journey, his wife Margareta encouraged him to take Jacob along, saying "In the presence of children, these people are decent." Jacob accompanied his father and heard him defend his actions on the basis of his religious beliefs. They returned home late under a moon-lit sky and shared a special time together. The event made a deep impression on Jacob and helped him to understand a principle that he would come to accept as his own.

Besides this experience, Jacob probably heard stories about the kinfolk who had left Russia in the 1870s because they felt that the government was revoking the Mennonite privilege of exemption from military service. In 1870 universal military conscription had been implemented, causing great concern in the Mennonite colonies. Eventually a compromise was reached and Mennonites were permitted to perform alternative service in forestry camps in lieu of military service. However, many people were not willing to accept such a compromise and they began to look for a new home in the west. Beginning in 1874 some 17,000 Mennonites—about one third of the total Mennonite population in Russia—left for Canada and the United States. A number of Klippenfeld folk moved to the United States at that time. Among them were Johann Thiessen's older half-sister Sarah Kornelsen and her husband Heinrich Voth.<sup>25</sup> Knowledge of this emigration would have taught Jacob that pacifism was a central element of Mennonite faith.

### **An Emerging Identity**

The Mennonite colony world into which Jacob Thiessen was born was very unique. In many ways, it was like a state within a state or, as David G. Rempel has termed it, "a commonwealth."<sup>26</sup> For more than a century, Mennonites had worshipped freely, governed themselves, and developed their own social, economic and educational life largely apart from their Russian neighbours. To be sure, the colonies were not nearly as isolated and autonomous as they had been initially. Nevertheless, children grew up with a very distinct identity as Mennonites that set them

apart from their Russian and other neighbours. Jacob was profoundly shaped by this unique Mennonite commonwealth. His life revolved around home, farm, village, school and church—all of which shared and reinforced certain beliefs, values and traditions, and provided him with a keen sense of who he was. In his consciousness, he was first and foremost a Mennonite.

This is not to suggest that Jacob had little contact with the wider society. By 1900 there was a great deal of interaction between Mennonite colonists and their Russian, Ukrainian and German neighbours. As already mentioned, Jacob learned Ukrainian from a young girl hired by his mother to help look after him and his siblings. His father often employed Russian men to help with the harvest. Russian farmers from the community of Stulnevo, northeast of Klippenfeld, brought their grain to the Klippenfeld mills to be ground. From time to time Gypsy caravans or Jewish peddlers wound their way through the village selling various wares. When the Thiessens visited Tiegenhagen, they passed by Tokmak, a Russian city on the northern boundary of the colony, and when they made occasional shopping trips, they travelled to Chernigovka, another Russian centre east of Klippenfeld.

On some occasions the Thiessens hosted special Russian guests because of Johann's position as mayor. One time an important official stopped at the house for business. What Jacob noted was that the official asked for a translation of the German Bible verse found on a wall plaque. Another time, when the district governor visited the village, it was Johann Thiessen's duty to greet the honoured guest. He did so according to a traditional Ukrainian ceremony denoting respect and submission—presenting an offering of bread and salt.

While many Mennonites held condescending attitudes toward the Russian peasantry and the Gypsies that lived beyond the colony, both Johann and Margareta Thiessen were different. They made a point of developing good relationships with their non-Mennonite neighbours. For instance, Margareta had special friends among the Gypsy women who visited Klippenfeld. Many Mennonites considered the Gypsies thieves and kidnappers and kept their distance. Not so, Margareta. She treated them as friends and they responded in kind; oftentimes, Gypsies carried messages to her relatives in other villages. When Margareta died in 1921, Gypsies were present at her burial. The Thiessens also defied a common practice by insisting that their Russian hired help eat at the same table as the family.<sup>27</sup> In some Mennonite homes, Russian workers not only ate at a separate table, they also ate different food. Young Jacob observed his parents' actions and was moved. Late in life he wrote to his brother:

At the moment I recall that our dear parents had many friends among the Gypsies and our Russian neighbours. They tried to get along with all people in love. So much of what I learned from them has remained with me and is of such great benefit now.<sup>28</sup>

Besides being Mennonite, other important factors shaped Jacob's sense of self, although he was probably not conscious of these and how they moulded him. First of all, as a boy and not a girl in a patriarchal and highly gendered society, he could expect certain opportunities and privileges that his sisters could not. For instance, he could dare to dream about a higher education. (There were several girls' high schools in the Mennonite colonies, but a much lower proportion of girls attended them than boys attended the *Zentralschule*.) He could foresee the day when he would have a voice in church or civic affairs. He could anticipate a time when he would be a husband and father and his word would be the final one. If he had thought about it, he might even have pictured himself in some kind of leadership role in the community. It is doubtful that Jacob stopped to think about his maleness and how that gave him a privileged place within Mennonite society.

Secondly, Jacob came from a family that was situated at the centre of village life, both literally and figuratively.<sup>29</sup> The Thiessens lived next to the school and in the middle of Klippenfeld village. More significantly, the family's economic prosperity and father Johann's role as mayor gave them a certain social status within the village community. Jacob thus grew up with a sense of being at the "centre" of things. In addition to his gifts, this notion of "location" would enable him to move rather easily into positions of leadership in the future.<sup>30</sup>

### **On to Gnadenfeld**

When Jacob graduated from village school at age 13 in 1907 he was at a crossroads. Formal education for most children ended here, since by this time they had acquired a level of literacy, knowledge and understanding sufficient for them to participate fully in society and to assume the expected vocations—farming for boys and homemaking for girls. Only very recently had any Klippenfeld children pursued studies beyond the village school level. The first one was Susanna Wall, who in 1905 had gone to Riga, Latvia, to study midwifery. Then in 1906 her brothers Johann and Franz had begun studies at the Gnadenfeld *Zentralschule* (high school). When the brothers returned to Klippenfeld for the summer of 1907, they encouraged Jacob to enroll at Gnadenfeld as well.

Jacob had already decided that he wanted to be a teacher, and he longed to continue his studies at the *Zentralschule*. He was supported in

this desire by his mother Margareta and by his teacher, Abram Pankratz. Given the patriarchal nature of Mennonite society, however, the blessing of Jacob's father was essential and Johann Thiessen was reluctant. Johann reflected an older attitude which regarded the teaching profession as somehow less honourable than farming, even though sensibilities were changing rapidly in this regard.<sup>31</sup> Not given to many words, Johann remained silent, even after Pankratz paid him a visit to discuss the matter. However, at some point he had a change of heart. Perhaps the words of the teacher or the encouragement of his wife Margareta persuaded him; perhaps he simply realized that his bright son would never make a good farmer. After a trip to Gnadenfeld, during which time he located a boarding place for Jacob, he informed his son that he could attend *Zentralschule* that fall.

Jacob was elated at the news. He wanted to jump up and kiss his father, but such open demonstrations of affection were uncommon in his family. Instead, he ran to the home of his friends, the Wall brothers, to share the good news. Jacob would forever be grateful to his father for allowing him to pursue his studies. Still, it seems that Johann's emotional distance and his less than enthusiastic attitude toward higher education were painful things for Jacob. This might explain why, as Jacob matured, he frequently drew close to older men—men who valued education, who could see his potential as a teacher and a leader, and who could be the mentors that his father was not.<sup>32</sup>

Preparations for Jacob's departure were soon underway. The family made a trip to Chernigovka to purchase clothing and other necessities. Jacob's mother also gave him rudimentary lessons in changing linen and making his bed. Evidently this had not been one of his daily chores thus far, and the experience was a sobering one. His mother had high standards for proper bed-making, and it took a number of attempts before Jacob adequately mastered the task. It had not yet registered with him that his mother's loving attention to his physical and emotional needs would no longer be so close at hand.

Just days after his fourteenth birthday, Jacob boarded the family buggy with his parents and left the secure environs of Klippenfeld for the town of Gnadenfeld. He tried to be nonchalant about his departure, but deep down felt very insecure. He had been warned that there were roughnecks at school and that he, being small for his age, might be the target of their pranks. The one thing that reassured him was that he knew that his friends, Johann and Franz Wall, would be returning to the *Zentralschule* as well. In Gnadenfeld, his father directed the horses to the home of the Janzens, where he had made arrangements for Jacob to receive board and room. The moment of parting soon arrived. Jacob's



mother wept and hugged him. As usual, his father kept his emotions in check, but in a touching gesture, pressed several rubles into his son's hand so he would have some pocket money. They took their leave.

For Jacob, a new chapter of life was beginning—one in which the prediction of the midwife would be fulfilled.

## 2

1907–1914

### Student and Teacher

Decades later, Jacob would look upon his teen years with great fondness. He would remember the comradery of fellow students, the formative influence of teachers and the expanding horizon of his small, sheltered world. Most of all he would remember the joy of finally becoming a teacher. These were years of promise and possibility and the world seemed rosy.

In many ways, these were privileged years for Jacob: they coincided with what have frequently been called “the golden years” for the Mennonite colonies of southern Russia. In the years leading up to 1914, Mennonite agricultural productivity was at its peak, and new forays into industrial production were demonstrating much success. The school system offered a high standard of education and included some 450 elementary schools, 19 boys’ high schools, four girls’ schools, two teachers’ colleges, two business colleges and a school for the deaf. Hospitals, mental institutions and an orphanage had been developed in response to health and welfare needs. Economically, educationally and institutionally, the colonies were at their zenith. They stood in stark contrast to the Russian peasant communities which surrounded them. For Russian peasants and workers, these years were anything but “golden.” But as a Mennonite, Jacob could enjoy the benefits of growing to adulthood within a prosperous and progressive milieu.

#### **Gnadenfeld**

The difference between the sleepy village of Klippenfeld and the bustling town of Gnadenfeld must have been quite striking to Jacob. With a population of approximately 600, Gnadenfeld was probably more than twice the size of his home village.<sup>1</sup> Instead of a single street, it had two long (more than a kilometre) parallel streets lined on either side with farmsteads, a tree-lined alley between them and a fourth street crossing and joining all three. The town boasted the district administrative office, several businesses, a bookstore, a doctor’s office and the all-important post office. It was amazing to Jacob that the mail arrived and departed Gnadenfeld on a daily basis; in Klippenfeld it came only once a week.

There were also three schools: the village school, the *Zentralschule* (boys' high school), and a brand new *Mädchenschule* (girls' high school). The ornate and imposing Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church held a prominent place in the centre of town.

Gnadenfeld was founded in 1835 by a group of 40 Mennonite families who had immigrated from Brandenburg, Germany, the previous year. The group was led by a dynamic minister named Wilhelm Lange, a former Lutheran. As a result of his leadership and the high level of education of the people themselves, the Gnadenfeld community was soon known for its innovative religious, educational and cultural life. In 1870, when the Molotschna colony was divided into two administrative districts, Gnadenfeld became the administrative centre for the southeastern portion of the colony and the 28 villages located therein. Until this time, Halbstadt, on the northwest corner, had served the entire colony.

From the beginning, the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church was known for its pietist character. Ältester Lange had been highly influenced by the Moravian Pietist movement which emphasized a personal conversion experience, strong devotional life and abstinence from worldly entertainments such as dancing, card-playing and drinking. Under his leadership, numerous practices which were unknown elsewhere in the colony became commonplace at Gnadenfeld. These included child dedication services, annual missions festivals and women's fundraising programs for missions.<sup>2</sup> Ältester Lange was a personal friend of Eduard Wuest, minister of an evangelical Lutheran church near Molotschna, and frequently invited Wuest to speak at the Gnadenfeld missions festivals. Wuest was known for his energetic and forceful preaching, which contrasted notably with the staid and unemotional way most Mennonite preachers read their sermons. The influence of Wuest was considered a factor in the decision of several leaders to leave the Gnadenfeld congregation and form the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860. For these various reasons, the Mennonites of Gnadenfeld were sometimes referred to as "Lutheran Mennonites."

The Gnadenfeld *Zentralschule* dated back to 1857 when residents of the village established a parochial secondary school like one they had left behind in Germany. A large and rather lavish building was constructed, and in 1859 the school acquired the right to train teachers for village schools. In the wake of the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church, the school experienced significant upheaval and was closed in 1863. It reopened in 1873 as a *Zentralschule* operated by the Gnadenfeld municipality. Two others were located in Halbstadt and Orloff.<sup>3</sup> In the early years Gnadenfeld often had 40 or so students, but by the time of Jacob Thiessen's attendance the student population averaged about 20.

Johann Thiessen had arranged room and board for his son at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Janzen. There Jacob lived along with 11 other students. Mrs. Janzen was a kind and motherly soul who quickly won the hearts of the boys. Mr. Janzen, on the other hand, was a strict housefather who swiftly put an end to any foolishness with a glare over the top of his spectacles or a sharp knock on the door. A mortifying experience for Jacob occurred early in his stay at the Janzens when sauerkraut was served for a noon meal. Jacob hated sauerkraut, and at home his mother had never forced him to eat it. But there was no such escape at the table of *Onkel* (uncle) Janzen. Jacob tried to disguise the taste of the sauerkraut, first with a bit of salt and then a bit of pepper. But alas, the lid of the pepper shaker fell off and the contents of the shaker emptied themselves into his bowl. All eyes were on him. With feigned bravery he began to shovel mouthfuls of the soup into his mouth. But the repugnant taste and smell were overpowering. Fortunately, he made it outdoors before he threw up the entire revolting meal. He returned indoors some time later hungry and thoroughly humiliated.<sup>4</sup>

Although thankful to be studying in Gnadenfeld, Jacob was very homesick for his family in Klippenfeld. At the end of the first week, he decided to walk home, since no plans had been made for someone to pick him up so soon. The 18-kilometre journey took him five hours, and it was mid-afternoon by the time he arrived. Upon reaching the tops of the Hamberg hills he saw Klippenfeld before him and thought he had never before seen a more beautiful sight. There was much rejoicing upon his unexpected arrival. The following day, Sunday, brother Johann drove Jacob back to Gnadenfeld. Since his room-mates from nearby Paulsheim were not scheduled to return until Monday morning, he spent the evening alone. Jacob cried hard that evening, longing for the nearness of his family.

Once the initial waves of homesickness had passed, Jacob applied himself to his studies and enjoyed them. The *Zentralschule* curriculum consisted of three years of study with 38 credit hours per year.<sup>5</sup> The level of education was equivalent to that of a North American junior high school. Russian language, mathematics, history, geography, sciences, drawing and penmanship were all taught in Russian, whereas Bible study, church history, including some Mennonite history, and German language were all taught in German. At the *Zentralschule* Jacob received more systematic instruction in Mennonite history and theology than he had until this point. However, the instruction had a decidedly pietist flavour, reflecting the educational background of his religion teacher and the general disposition of the Gnadenfeld community. Recent research suggests that there was little emphasis on the Anabaptist movement and



*Teachers and students of the Gnadenfeld Zentralschule, ca. 1907. Jacob is third from right in the second row. During Jacob's years at the school, two of the three teachers were Russians.*

its commitments to discipleship and nonresistance.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Mennonite faith was strongly associated with a personal conversion experience and abstaining from the “ways of the world.”

During Jacob’s years, two of the three teachers at the Gnadenfeld *Zentralschule* were Russians. The principal and mathematics instructor was Fedodor Vassiliavich Teneta who encouraged Jacob to continue his studies as far as the Gymnasium level so he would be qualified to teach at a *Zentralschule*. Jacob knew that family finances would not allow this and he would be happy simply to become a village school teacher. Anatoly Nikolaievich Topchiev taught Russian literature and history. He had a friendly relationship with the students, occasionally inviting them to his home where he discussed politics with them or offered them a drink or a cigarette—Jacob declined these offers. But Topchiev was also a great teacher who instilled within his students a love for the works of Leo Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky and other Russian literary masters. Frequently he stopped students on the street and demanded to know what they were reading. During the summer months he even sent books to Jacob in Klippenfeld to keep his mind active and alert. Topchiev was clearly the favourite of Jacob’s Gnadenfeld teachers.

Only one Mennonite served on the Gnadenfeld faculty during this time. For the first two years of Jacob’s stay, the position was filled by Benjamin Ratzlaff, a minister of the Alexanderwohl congregation. He had studied at the Evangelists’ Institute of St. Chrischona near Basel, Switzerland. He taught the “Mennonite” subjects of Bible, church history and German. In 1909 Ratzlaff was succeeded by Johannes Heinrich Unruh, a graduate of the Halbstadt pedagogical program, who had also studied for a year at Bethel College in Newton, Kansas.<sup>7</sup>

During his three years in Gnadenfeld, Jacob worshipped at the large Gnadenfeld church. The experience made a powerful impression on the young teenager. Although old, the building was considered one of the finest in the colony. It had a seating capacity of 500 and boasted the only pipe organ of any Mennonite church in Russia. A choir sang regularly. But the imposing presence of Ältester Heinrich Dirks made the most significant impact on Jacob. Dirks was well known as the first Russian Mennonite to be involved in foreign missions, having served in Sumatra between 1869 and 1881. He was elected *Ältester* on his return to Russia in 1881 and continued to promote the cause of missions. His tall striking figure, mane of thick white hair and moving oratory quite impressed Jacob.

Jacob completed the first year of studies at the *Zentralschule* with honours. During the second year, however, he lodged at a home where the discipline was not nearly as strict as at the Janzens. Consequently, he

filled his evenings with laughter and merrymaking with roommates and fellow classmates, and his school work was neglected. With some intense cramming at the end of the year, he managed to pass all his subjects. But his dear teacher, A.N. Topchiev, was clearly displeased with his results. Jacob also roused the ire of his father, who indicated that if Jacob's grades did not improve there would be no financial support for any further education. At heart Jacob was eager to please those dear to him, and the unhappiness of his father and his favourite teacher quickly put an end to this taste of youthful rebellion. During the final year, Jacob once again applied himself and completed his requirements with flying colours.

At one time, a diploma from the *Zentralschule* program would have been the only academic requirement demanded of village school teachers. But by 1878 all teachers were expected to have completed two years of pedagogical study which took place at the Halbstadt *Zentralschule*. Within the Thiessen family there seems to have been no debate as to whether Jacob would continue his studies.

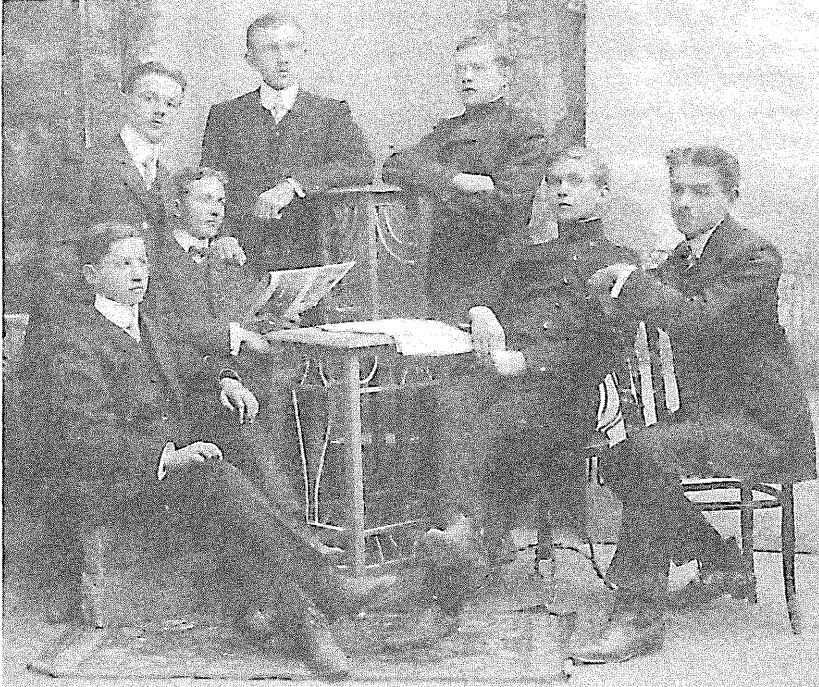
### **Halbstadt**

In the fall of 1910 at age 17, Jacob resumed his studies in Halbstadt. It was the largest and most cosmopolitan of the communities in the Molotschna colony.

For Jacob Thiessen, the difference between the towns of Gnadenfeld and Halbstadt was again striking. However, if he had not visited the city of Berdiansk just weeks earlier, the size and diversity of his new home may have seemed even more remarkable. Jacob was impressed by the amazing wealth that the Mennonites of Halbstadt possessed at this period in time—as attested to by their palatial homes and businesses. This was in sharp contrast to the Russian and Ukrainian workers who lived in barracks in the industrial part of town. For him, the juxtaposition of Mennonite wealth and Russian poverty was most disturbing.

Jacob found board and room with the Gerhard and Katherine Thielmann family. Mr. Thielmann was a former teacher, now a book-keeper for one of the local businesses. Mrs. Thielmann, though warm and friendly, was quite sickly. They had three very bright children, two sons and a daughter. The atmosphere in the Thielmann home reminded Jacob of his own home, and he felt comfortable. His friendship with the Thielmanns would be life-long.

During Jacob's year at the *Zentralschule* there were 23 students.<sup>8</sup> They came from many different Mennonite settlements—the Crimea, Zagradovka, Memrik and Samara—and had attended a variety of *Zentral-schulen*. There was a good comraderie within the group, with much



*Jacob and some of his comrades at the Halbstadt teachers' college. They came from many Mennonite settlements—the Crimea, Zgradovka, Memrik and Samara. Jacob is seated on the far left.*

joking and jesting and singing between classes. Several of the friendships begun there would last Jacob's entire life.

By the time he arrived in Halbstadt at age 17 he would have undergone puberty and probably would have experienced some sexual awakening. Yet we know nothing of this aspect of his life. Sexual development was not a topic of discussion within the Mennonite community. Some sex education happened as mothers spoke to daughters and, less often, fathers spoke to sons, but these conversations were usually limited to veiled hints. Most young people gained their knowledge of sexual matters by simply observing the animals on the farm. Many years later, when he felt duty-bound to inform his own son about the facts of life, Jacob took him to an agricultural station where he could see the animals mating.<sup>9</sup>

The context where teenage boys and girls mingled and got to know one another was the church rather than the school. Originally, the *Zentralschule* had been co-educational like the village schools but, upon the insistence of the government, separate *Mädchenschulen* (girls' high



schools) had been established beginning in 1874. Thus, it was church events such as weddings and funerals that provided the occasion for members of the opposite sex to interact. Other acceptable mixed activities were church choir, young people's outings and the informal gatherings that happened on Sunday afternoon on the village street. Dating as we know it today was virtually unknown. It is possible that Jacob participated in some of the special young people's events, and perhaps watched some of the teenage girls from a distance, but that was probably the extent of any romantic interest at this point. He was much too absorbed in his studies.

The two-year pedagogy program was fairly rigorous.<sup>10</sup> It included advanced study in Bible and religious doctrine, German and Russian literature, mathematics, science, psychology, pedagogy and its history, and various teaching methods. During the second year, the curriculum also required some practice teaching in the Halbstadt Model School which was essentially the district elementary school. It accommodated the pedagogy program by giving students practical experience in teaching. A graduate of this program was required to pass a state-administered exam before he could receive his permanent teaching diploma.

Jacob's memoirs include several pages about his teachers at Halbstadt, a number of whom influenced him profoundly. His favourite teacher and mentor was Kornelius A. Wiens, teacher of German language. Wiens was known for his upright bearing, proper dress and warm greeting for everyone—things for which Jacob would also become known. He was considered an exceptional teacher, who was also interested in building the character of his students. He passed on many proverbs and maxims to help them with their daily living. Wiens had a particular concern for the Russian workers who lived in the Halbstadt barracks and tried to instill that same concern within his students. Later on in life, Jacob would credit K.A. Wiens with his own sense of compassion for the poor, unemployed and needy.

Another important teacher was Abram A. Klassen, the religion teacher. Klassen arrived in Halbstadt the same year as Jacob, having previously taught a number of years in the Crimea and in Zagradovka. He had spent several years studying in a German seminary and was a deep thinker with many complex ideas. Some students did not appreciate him for this reason, but Jacob found Klassen's lectures a stimulant to further Bible study.<sup>11</sup> In 1917 Klassen was ordained as *Ältester* of the Halbstadt Mennonite Church. Both he and Wiens lost their lives in exile during the Stalinist era.

Peter Braun was the singing teacher. Eventually he would become known not so much for his teaching but for his amazing collection of



*Jacob Thiessen as a student at Halbstadt.* Photo: Courtesy Alf Redekopp

archival materials relating to the history of the Molotschna colony.<sup>12</sup> Johann Harder taught mathematics, Andrei Nikolaievich Fominsky was the Russian instructor and Peter Kondratievich Pavlenko, the principal, taught pedagogy and teaching methods. The latter, it seems, had a strong anti-German bias which did not endear him to the Mennonite constituency in which he found himself. He also liked to organize special dramatic presentations, which were not always appreciated by the local folks. The editor of *Friedensstimme*, the Mennonite newspaper, declined to publish accounts of these evenings.

For Jacob, the years in Halbstadt were stimulating and challenging and he took his studies most seriously. He was exhilarated by the discussions with teachers and fellow students. He enjoyed his practice teaching in the model school. He even found the exercise of critiquing his classmates and their teaching styles, and being critiqued by them, helpful. Always eager to please his teachers, he spent many hours on his school work so as not to disappoint them. He wished the pedagogy program could have extended to a third year.

Jacob attended worship at the large Halbstadt Mennonite Church. The congregation had a different quality than Gnadenfeld. Neither pietist like Gnadenfeld nor rigidly traditionalist like some other congregations, Halbstadt had a liberal and tolerant character. A number of its leaders were highly educated, having trained in Russian universities or European seminaries, and their tolerant views set the tone for the congregation. Halb-



*The 1912 graduating class of the Halbstadt teachers' college. Jacob is fourth from the left in the middle row. Of the 23 students enrolled in Jacob's class in the pedagogy program, 17 graduated.*

stadt, for example, was at the forefront of advocating independence for local groups in matters of theology and organization. It was also one of the few Mennonite churches in the colony which did not insist that persons transferring their membership from another denomination be re-baptized. In addition to the more intellectually-oriented sermons preached by the Halbstadt ministers, these practices would have been fairly radical departures for Jacob. From positions he took later in life, it seems clear that he remained fairly solidly in the pietist camp. However, he was significantly influenced by Halbstadt's *Ältester*, Heinrich Unruh of Muntau, who became a friend. Unruh was known for his gifts of moderation and mediation and his ability to build unity and understanding between groups with widely disparate views.<sup>13</sup>

Of the 23 students enrolled in Jacob's class in the pedagogy program, 17 graduated. To celebrate their accomplishments, a number of them made a week-long trip by train and ship to Chortitza Island and the city of Alexandrovsk. Before they bade farewell and went their separate ways, they made a pledge that they would gather for a reunion five years hence. Because of the turbulent times which followed, the reunion did not take place. Fifty-three years would pass before survivors of the graduating class of 1912 gathered in Canada to remember their years in Halbstadt.<sup>14</sup>

Even before his graduation from the pedagogy program, Jacob received a visit from a representative of Tiegenhagen village, inviting him to accept a teaching position there. The visitor might well have been his relative, Jacob Kornelsen. Kornelsen was the son of Jacob's paternal grandmother, Sarah Kornelsen Thiessen and her first husband, and therefore a half-brother of Jacob's father Johann. Jacob knew the Kornelsen family well since the Thiessens and Kornelsens had visited back and forth between Klippenfeld and Tiegenhagen while he was a child.

Jacob was obviously interested in the Tiegenhagen teaching position but knew that he still had to pass the state exams before receiving his diploma and there was no assurance that he would pass. He also knew that it was the Russian school inspector, not the local villagers, who ultimately determined where teachers were assigned. Thus he, together with two Tiegenhagen representatives, made a trip to Melitopol to discuss the situation with the inspector. According to Jacob's memoir account, the inspector encouraged him to study hard and to return after the exams. In the meantime, all parties would keep silent about an appointment for Jacob in Tiegenhagen.<sup>15</sup>

Jacob returned to Klippenfeld for the early part of the summer and in August travelled to Berdiansk where, with the help of a tutor, he prepared for the exams to be held on September 1. As it turned out, the exams did not take place until the end of September. This gave Jacob more time to

study, but it also meant that the Tiegenhagen school was short a teacher for the first month of the school year. Evidently the folks at Tiegenhagen were eager to have Jacob, as they held the position for him for that additional month.

The oral exams were gruelling, and only six of the 22 students passed, Jacob among them. Elated and exhausted from the intensity of the preceding weeks, he lingered for several days in Berdiansk, enjoying the beach and the famous vineyards. But soon the words of his teacher, K.A. Wiens, began to nag at him, “Wo die Pflicht ruft, da muss das Gefuehl schweigen.” (“When duty calls, feelings must be put aside.”)<sup>16</sup> He was soon on his way to report to the school inspector and to receive confirmation of his assignment as teacher at the Tiegenhagen school. Upon his arrival in Melitopol, the inspector supposedly observed his wan and weary countenance, and told him to take a week’s vacation before reporting for work. Jacob obediently went home to Klippenfeld, but he was so impatient to begin his new job that within only three days he was in Tiegenhagen.

### **Tiegenhagen**

Tiegenhagen had been founded in 1805 as the thirteenth of the Molotschna villages. Like the oldest villages, it lay about a kilometre east of the Molochnaia River. Across the river to the west were the villages inhabited by German Lutherans and beyond that “Colony Mountain,” while to the east lay the gently rising Russian steppe. The main village street ran north-south with the homesteads and house-barns laid out in typical fashion on either side. One short crossroad cut through the middle of the village at the schoolhouse; another one at the northerly end of the village led to the homesteads of small farmers and landless residents. Between the western edge of the village and the river were a number of artesian wells where villagers obtained their water, and two good-sized ponds where young people enjoyed swimming, boating and skating. Large acacia trees lined the main street and mature woodlots were located to the east and west sides of village. The trees provided a home to many species of birds, including swallows, turtle doves, storks and nightingales. The sandy soil ensured generally good crops of wheat, rye and oats, and very productive watermelon and pumpkin patches.<sup>17</sup>

Besides the school, Tiegenhagen had only a few community enterprises: a small store, a blacksmith shop, a wagon wheel shop, a small factory producing automobile springs and the Boese windmill at the northern outskirts. In addition, there was a Mennonite Brethren meeting house where most of the villagers worshipped, even if they were not members of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Jacob was the second teacher for the Tiegenhagen school. The senior teacher, D.H. Koop, and his family occupied the teacherage adjacent to the school. Therefore, Jacob arranged to take his room and board with the family of his Uncle Jacob. Kornelsen's first wife had died soon after their marriage; his second wife was Helena Martens. The Martens had had eleven children together but only five were still living: Henry (b. 1876), Sara (b. 1882), Helena (b. 1888), Katharina (b. 1893) and Maria (b. 1897).<sup>18</sup> Henry and Helena had already married and started families of their own, but the remaining three daughters, Sara, Katharina and Maria, were still at home.

The Tiegenhagen schoolhouse was an older building.<sup>19</sup> In 1909 its single room had been divided into two classrooms because of the growing number of students. Initially the two teachers both taught all grades, but they soon divided the 50-plus students into upper and lower classes, with Koop teaching the more senior level and Jacob the junior level. The upper half of the wall separating their classrooms could be folded down for opening and closing exercises and other special classes. The wall was far from soundproof, and both teachers had to remember to keep their voices down. Each class had a small lectern, while they shared a globe, a modest library and some maps.

Jacob had just turned 19 when he entered the classroom as "Teacher Thiessen." He felt very young and vulnerable in those first weeks of teaching and frequently experienced waves of nausea and dizziness as he stood before his students. At those times, he took to heart the words of his mentor, K.A. Wiens, "The world belongs to those who have courage."<sup>20</sup> It seems that Jacob also adopted some of Wiens' manners early on, perhaps as a way of overcoming his feelings of insecurity and of commanding respect from his students and fellow villagers. For instance, he quickly became known for his proper appearance—his suit was always pressed, his white shirt always clean—and he used a walking stick as he strode down the village street.<sup>21</sup> With time, he became more comfortable in the classroom and the community.

Classes were held Monday through Friday and Saturday morning. Sessions began at 8:00 a.m. with opening devotions, a song and a prayer and ended in the same way at 4:00 p.m. The first hour of the day was devoted to the study of a particular Bible story, taught in German. This was followed by literature and grammar studies in the German and Russian languages with instruction in mathematics, sciences and geography in the afternoon. For the younger class, some of these subjects were taught in German; the upper class learned them in Russian.<sup>22</sup> The subject that caused Jacob the most grief was singing. Although he enjoyed music a great deal, he did not consider himself particularly gifted

# TIEGENHAGEN

in 1916

By William Schroeder

□ Ivan Kasian  
(cowherd)

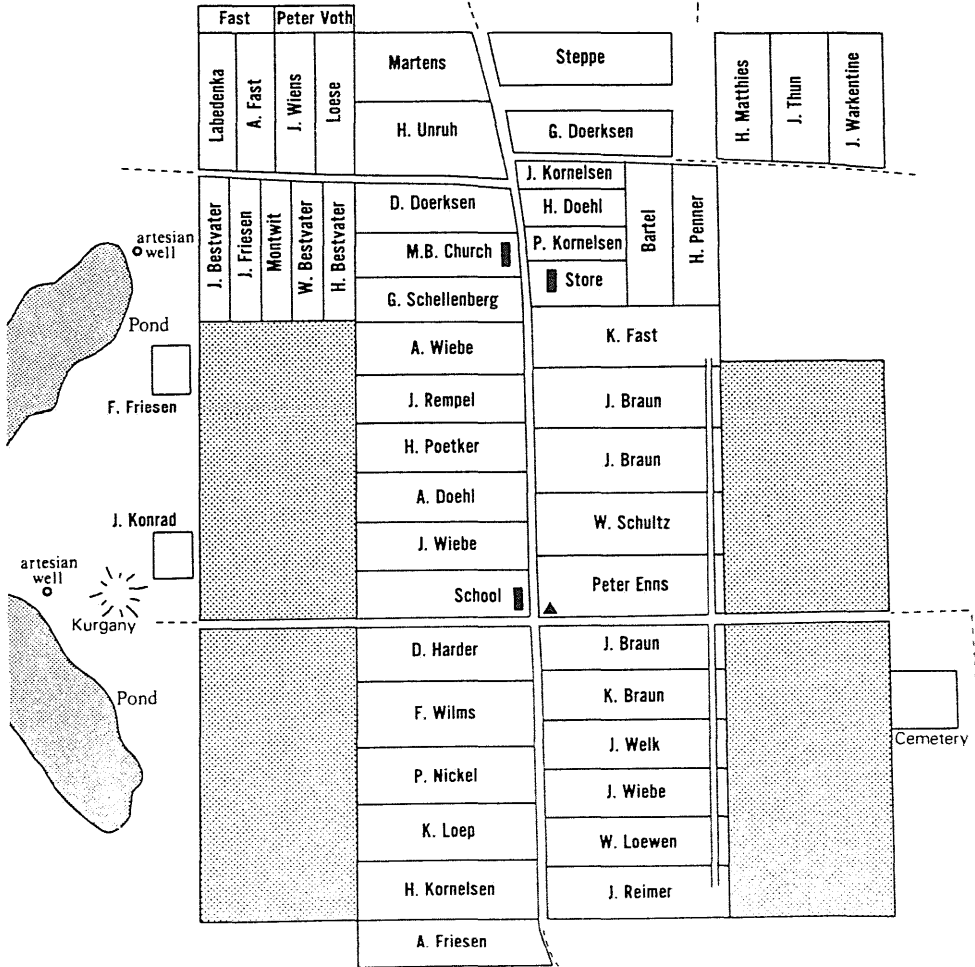
▨ Forest

▲ Jail and Fire  
Fighting Equipment

--- Trails



P. Boese



musically. He was fortunate that his colleague, D.H. Koop, was an excellent music teacher and had already built up a good school choir.

Except for his second year at Gnadenfeld, Jacob had always been a very conscientious student, and he was now a conscientious teacher. It was very important that he be punctual and well prepared for his classes. He expected the same of his students and quickly came to be regarded as a strict teacher with high expectations.<sup>23</sup> Despite his reputation for strictness, he was considered a good teacher. When D.H. Koop left Tiegenhagen after Jacob's second year, Jacob was promoted to the position of senior teacher and principal. No one from his graduating class had attained such a level of responsibility in such short order.<sup>24</sup> Some years later, Molotschna's historian, Heinrich Goerz, listed Jacob as one of the colony's more important teachers.<sup>25</sup>

One of Jacob's weaknesses was his quick temper. His anger was easily roused when students did not measure up or when they misbehaved and, as was customary, he was not averse to using the strap to assert his authority. One student received the strap for sneaking out of class; another was disciplined for making fun of a fellow student.<sup>26</sup> At a certain point, however, Jacob had a chance encounter with A. N. Topchiev, his former teacher from Gnadenfeld, who challenged him for using the strap. Thereafter, Jacob used it much less frequently. Instead, he tried to reason and negotiate with difficult students. But that was not always easy, given the general acceptance of the strap as a symbol of the teacher's authority. When Jacob became teacher of the senior class, he occasionally encountered students who were physically larger than he was, and at times he was tempted once again to resort to corporal punishment. On one occasion, when he was having difficulties with a large disruptive fellow, he grabbed him by his collar and pants and held him down on his desk. He did this a number of times before finally releasing the student. Evidently there were no further problems from this student.

Jacob was eager to win the trust and affection of his students, and his warmth, friendliness and cheerful attitude served him well in this regard. He frequently joined in noon-hour games, and was fond of organizing special outings such as picnics alongside the village pond. These things added to his popularity. Moreover, in his Halbstadt studies he had learned the pedagogical principle, "To individualize and not to generalize," and this became a motto for the way he related to his students.<sup>27</sup> He took a keen interest in each boy and girl, his or her family life and academic progress. Years later, former students of Jacob's would recall his caring attention to them as individuals. At the end of his life, he would still be corresponding with a number of these Tiegenhagen pupils.<sup>28</sup>





*Teachers Jacob Thiessen and D.H. Koop with students of the Tiegenhagen school in 1913. When D.H. Koop left Tiegenhagen, Jacob was promoted to the position of senior teacher and principal at age 21 after only his second year of teaching.*

One of the things that Jacob found most helpful as a new teacher was to interact with other, more experienced teachers. His colleague, D. H. Koop, gave him much encouragement and support during that important first year. Meetings of the Molotschna Mennonite Teachers' Society provided an opportunity to meet and learn from many other teachers. Jacob attended his first meeting of the society in 1912 in Rueckenau. Founded in 1905, the society was an important avenue for teachers to receive ongoing "professional development." Jacob found the environment very stimulating and encouraging. Among the teachers he met at the

1912 conference was Benjamin B. Janz, a teacher and Mennonite Brethren minister from Tiege,<sup>29</sup> who eventually became a good friend and co-worker.

Jacob's relationship with the Tiegenhagen villagers developed slowly. Initially, he was shy and reserved. During the week he was busy with classes and class preparation. Weekends, however, were lonely and boring. Since they lasted only from Saturday noon until Sunday evening, there was not enough time to go home to Klippenfeld for a visit except for some special occasion. But Jacob was reluctant to join in many village activities. It was considered improper for single male teachers to socialize with the village youth even though they might be peers.<sup>30</sup> Jacob felt it important to abide by this code of behaviour so he spent many weekend hours not knowing quite what to do with himself. With time he did develop good relationships with the villagers and eventually came to regard himself as one of the "Tiegenhagener" (Tiegenhagen villagers).

Like most villagers, Jacob attended the Mennonite Brethren church for Sunday worship and weekly Bible study. Many villagers were members of the *kirchliche* congregation in Halbstadt but it was more convenient to attend worship locally. Relationships between the Mennonite Brethren and the *kirchliche* in Tiegenhagen seem to have been quite amicable. This may be due in part to the influence of a British missionary 50 or 60 years earlier. In the mid-1800s, Jacob Martens, a resident of Tiegenhagen and minister in the Orloff-Petershagen congregation, had promoted spiritual renewal through the dissemination of religious literature. At some point, he had met and befriended John Melville, an evangelical missionary of the British and Foreign Bible Society, who distributed evangelical tracts and Bibles in Molotschna. For a time Martens acted as Melville's distribution agent. Melville had a close relationship with Eduard Wuest, the evangelical preacher who influenced the formation of the Mennonite Brethren Church. It is clear that Melville's literature affected the religious life of the colony in general and the village of Tiegenhagen in particular.<sup>31</sup> Since Melville visited Tiegenhagen frequently, and since his commitments reinforced those of minister Jacob Martens, it seems safe to conclude that Tiegenhagen was home to a more pietistic spirituality than was found in other villages. In all likelihood, the *kirchliche* and Mennonite Brethren villagers shared similar perspectives that enabled them to worship together without difficulty.

There was a connection between minister Jacob Martens and Jacob Thiessen, even though Martens died long before Thiessen was born. Among Martens' offspring was Helena Martens Kornelsen (b. 1851), in whose Tiegenhagen home Jacob Thiessen resided and who eventually became his mother-in-law. Helena remembered the visits of John

Melville to her family home when she was a young child, recalling especially the English hymn which Melville had taught her and her siblings, "Just As I Am." Many years later Jacob would become a member of the British and Foreign Bible Society in Canada.

Jacob himself was quite comfortable with the theology of the Mennonite Brethren, likely because of the pietist influence to which he had been exposed in Gnadenfeld. To be sure, his own faith pilgrimage conformed more to the path emphasized by most *kirchliche*. In other words, his journey to faith had begun in early childhood and had deepened year by year through the prayerful nurture and example of parents, teachers and other mentors. But he also recognized the validity of a radical conversion experience and the need for each person to make a conscious personal choice about following Christ. Later on in life, some people accused him of a rather "MB-ish theology."<sup>32</sup> However, at least at one baptismal Sunday the MB minister offended Jacob and others. During the course of the worship service, the minister explained that the Russian Mennonites practised two forms of baptism: immersion, preferred by the MBs, and sprinkling, chosen by the *kirchliche*. He went into a lengthy explanation of the meaning of immersion, but did not do the same for sprinkling. When Jacob confronted him, the minister explained that he had acted thus because of the presence of a foreign guest. Supposedly, he would have demonstrated greater sensitivity if only the local people had been present.

Jacob's own faith, born and nurtured at his mother's knee, had deepened under the influence of teachers and ministers in Klippenfeld, Gnadenfeld and Halbstadt. When he was 14 he had attended a special evangelistic meeting which became a moment of decision for him.<sup>33</sup> As a result of that meeting—the date and location are unknown—he felt a deep sense of his own sinfulness and weakness and a profound sense of God's saving grace and strength.<sup>34</sup> He committed his life to Christ. Six years after this experience, while in his second year of teaching, Jacob requested baptism. The example and witness of his colleague D.H. Koop had convinced him that he wished to make a public expression of his faith.<sup>35</sup> The fact that so many years separated his initial faith decision from his baptism was not that unusual. The age of baptism for Russian Mennonite youth was typically the late teens or early twenties.

Jacob was baptized on Pentecost, May 24, 1914 in the village of Hierschau by Ältester Gerhard Plett and was accepted as a member of the Landskrone Mennonite Church.<sup>36</sup> Exactly why he joined the Landskrone church is somewhat of a puzzle. Since he lived much closer to and occasionally worshipped at the *kirchliche* church at Halbstadt, it would have made more geographic sense for him to join that congregation. In

truth, church membership had a different meaning than we might understand it today. Each congregation actually consisted of a cluster of locals meeting separately for worship. Thus, formal church membership was not necessarily associated with where one worshipped and actively participated in church life. Quite likely, Jacob chose to join the Landskrone congregation because it represented a link with his home community in Klippenfeld, about ten kilometres from Landskrone and, after, 1910 served by the Landskrone congregation rather than the one at Schoensee. Jacob's choice may also have been a reflection of his theological perspective. Landskrone was close to Gnadenfeld and was influenced by the pietist orientation of the Gnadenfeld church, whereas Halbstadt leaned toward a more liberal theology—something which was less comfortable for Jacob.

By the summer of 1914, Jacob had completed two years of teaching and was beginning to feel more secure in his chosen vocation. He had also made a public and formal commitment to follow Christ through baptism and church membership. Nearly 21 years of age, he was maturing and gaining self-confidence. He was also starting to think about marriage and establishing his own family. He observed the love and harmony in the Koop family and wanted that for himself.<sup>37</sup> Life held much promise and Jacob looked forward to the future. The outbreak of war in Europe that very fall, however, soon radically altered the course of his life—indeed, the lives of all the Mennonite people of southern Russia.

# 3

## 1914–1922

### **Troubled Times**

In 1914 very few inhabitants of the Mennonite colonies, including Jacob Thiessen, could have imagined that, within a few decades, their settlements and way of life would be destroyed. Yet, eventually that is what happened, beginning during the period 1914–1922. In contrast to the “golden years” of the previous decade, this interval would be marked by war, revolution, famine and economic devastation. For Jacob Thiessen, these eight years would forever be engraved on his heart and soul as the “troubled times.”<sup>1</sup> So great was the physical, emotional, social and spiritual upheaval for him, for his family and for the Mennonite people of southern Russia, that he could describe this time in no other way.

#### **War’s Outbreak**

For most Mennonites, the “troubled times” began with the outbreak of war in 1914. However, historian and anthropologist James Urry has suggested that the signs of impending doom were present much sooner, and were rooted in the contradictions and paradoxes of the Mennonite world in relation to the wider Russian society. Those contradictions had to do with Mennonite affluence and separateness. Despite significant extremes of wealth within the colonies themselves, overall prosperity set the Mennonites apart from most peasants in the region. Huge landed estates, owned by wealthy Mennonites, were especially conspicuous in light of severe land shortages among the Russian populace (as well as within Mennonite communities themselves). In larger centres like Halbstadt, the poverty of the primarily Russian worker class was juxtaposed against the wealth of successful Mennonite industrialists and manufacturers. The Mennonites’ use of the German language and their relatively separated villages and communities further set them apart from the people around them. These contradictions heightened the discontent of Russian peasants and to a lesser extent Russian workers, fed the suspicion and mistrust of Russian nationalists and, ultimately, meant the end of the Mennonite settlements. According to Urry, if the Mennonites had paid attention, they would have seen the “writing on the wall” much sooner than 1914.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it was Russia's declaration of war against Germany in 1914 and the subsequent wave of anti-German sentiment which roused serious concerns within the Mennonite community. During an earlier surge of Russian nationalism prior to the turn of the century, the Tsarist government had embarked upon a program of "russification" aimed at stamping out the rising nationalist sentiment of some non-Russian minorities within the Empire. Mennonites and other German-speaking colonists experienced russification most acutely in their educational system: schools came under the authority of the state and Russian became the primary language of instruction. After the Revolution of 1905, the Tsar decreed freedom of speech and of the press and introduced an assembly called a Duma with some limited functions to approve or reject proposed laws; these measures stemmed the tide of russification for a decade. But the outbreak of war against Germany in 1914 stimulated a revival of Russian nationalism and, with it, renewed strictures against German-speaking minority groups.

In November 1914 a Tsarist decree prohibited the use of German in public assemblies or in the press. For several months, Mennonite worship services were conducted in Russian or even Low German, the usual language of the home, and special permission had to be obtained for gatherings as innocuous as pig butchering. Early in 1915, *Friedensstimme*, the Mennonite newspaper published in Halbstadt, ceased publication for a two-year period. That same year all schools not employing a Russian teacher for all but German language and religious subjects were threatened with closure. Perhaps most disturbing was the promulgation of liquidation laws which compelled all German property owners to sell their holdings within eight months. Fortunately for Mennonites, the government's preoccupation with growing social unrest throughout the empire, and the debilitating losses on the western war front, prevented it from enforcing these liquidation laws. Besides feeling the brunt of anti-German decrees and legislative measures, Mennonites were attacked in Russian newspapers and their meetings and gatherings were closely observed by the Russian police.

In the face of anti-German propaganda, the Mennonites were eager to demonstrate that they were loyal Russian citizens, even if they would not take up arms in Russia's defence. In Halbstadt, a committee was organized immediately after the declaration of war in July 1914 to collect food, clothing and money for the families of Russian soldiers, especially those who lived and worked in local factories. By August, the Halbstadt municipality had gathered 64,000 rubles, which was allocated as follows: 20,000 for a gift to the Tsar, 7500 for the care of sick and wounded soldiers, and 36,500 rubles for general relief purposes. The municipal

assembly also agreed to maintain a total of 45 beds for wounded soldiers in its two hospitals. Other Mennonite colonies responded in similar ways.<sup>3</sup>

### *Forsteidienst*

Another Mennonite response was an expansion of the alternative service program. Since the 1870s, when absolute exemption from military service had been eliminated, young Mennonite men had performed a form of obligatory forestry service called *Forsteidienst* in lieu of active military duty. By 1914 many Mennonites were requesting a way of serving their country that did more to alleviate suffering—specifically, they wanted to care for wounded soldiers as Red Cross medics and orderlies. This new form of alternative service came to be known as the *Sanitätsdienst*. After an important meeting in July 1914, Molotschna ministers and *Ältesten* urged young men to volunteer for the *Sanitätsdienst*. By the end of October some 1300 Mennonite men had volunteered to care for war-wounded soldiers in hospitals or Red Cross ambulance trains.<sup>4</sup> With the introduction of conscription that same fall, all Mennonite men between the ages of 15 and 45, with some exceptions, were called up for service. It is estimated that by war's end approximately 6000 had served in the *Sanitätsdienst*, as well as some 7500 in the *Forsteidienst*.<sup>5</sup>

Just how Jacob Thiessen in Tiegenhagen was affected by developments in the early part of the war is unclear. No doubt he would have been aware of the anti-German sentiments and various measures taken against German-speaking citizens. He certainly would have known about the Mennonites' desire to demonstrate their loyalty to the Russian state and to aid the victims of war. He likely would have kept abreast of the development of the *Sanitätsdienst* option by reading *Friedensstimme*. He may even have witnessed the departure of trainloads of *Sanitätsdienst* recruits from Halbstadt. But it appears that it was not until mid-1915 that the reality of the war affected Jacob personally. Like other teachers, he had been spared the initial mobilization but, after the enormous casualties suffered by Russian forces in that first year of war, the state saw fit to mobilize teachers as well. By the summer of 1915, Jacob and many other Molotschna teachers found themselves in a forestry camp in the Alt-Berdian forest.

Jacob opted for *Forsteidienst* instead of *Sanitätsdienst*. Given that the latter was promoted with such enthusiasm by clergy and lay people in *Friedensstimme*,<sup>6</sup> and that it seemed to be the preference of the younger recruits, Jacob's choice is a bit of a puzzle. Years later, in a letter to a young friend facing a similar decision, he wrote: "As an aspiring young

man I would have preferred the way chosen by most Mennonites at that time and become a medical worker in an attractive uniform. Maybe I even would have become a secretary (*Schreiber*). However, a voice within said, ‘That is not the way for you.’”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps Jacob felt that the motivation of those choosing *Sanitätsdienst* was not altogether altruistic—after all, there was more personal glory to be gained by serving on a dangerous ambulance train than by planting trees. Perhaps, too, he was influenced by some of the more mature and experienced teachers who opted for forestry service.

For 22 months Jacob served in the *Forsteidienst*. His first assignment was in the Alt-Berdian forest, less than 20 kilometres to the south of Altonau, the southernmost of the Molotschna villages. Alt-Berdian was one of about a dozen forestry camps for Mennonite alternative service workers that had been established since 1880. The Mennonite colonies bore the costs of housing, feeding and clothing the workers, but the supervisors of the camps were usually Russian nationals. Eventually the costs of supporting these camp workers became so burdensome that the Mennonites sent a delegation to Petrograd to request that all camp workers be transferred to the medical units where costs would be borne by the Red Cross.<sup>8</sup>

At Alt-Berdian Jacob worked together with 30 to 40 other teachers in a tree nursery. The work was hard but not unbearable. A highlight for him was the friendship he developed with Jacob H. Janzen. Janzen was a teacher at the Orloff *Mädchenschule*, a minister in the Gnadenfeld congregation and an author of several plays and other literary works. Jacob had studied some of Janzen’s writings at Halbstadt and had first



*Mennonite men serving in the Forsteidienst help to build a road in the Crimea, ca. 1915. Jacob served in the forestry service for 22 months, first in the Alt-Berdian forest, then in the Crimea. Photo: MHCA*



met him in 1912 at the teachers' conference in Rueckenau. When the two Jacobs had the opportunity to work together, they engaged in weighty discussions about theology, philosophy, art and literature. On at least one occasion "Jacob the elder" found the physical work so taxing that "Jacob the younger" offered to do the work for both of them, if his companion would guide the conversation. Evidently this arrangement suited them well. Besides teacher and mentor, Janzen also assumed the role of spiritual counsellor for Jacob.<sup>9</sup>

Jacob H. Janzen held the *Forsteidienst* in very low regard. He felt it was a very poor way for Mennonites to give expression to their faith and their commitment to nonresistance. Indeed, he was convinced that few Mennonites any longer knew why they could go off to a forestry camp while their Russian neighbours took their places on the battleground. For Janzen, the camps symbolized the Mennonites' abandonment of a real commitment to live their faith. Not only that, they fostered undisciplined and unruly behaviour. It was often said that men leaving the colony for the Alt-Berdian forest would hang their consciences on the poplar trees at Altonau and pick them up on the return.<sup>10</sup> As an older and more learned member of the *Forsteidienst*, Janzen may well have been the object of some of the pranks played by younger members, and this may have coloured his views. Unfortunately, Jacob Thiessen has left nothing to indicate whether he shared Janzen's views or experiences.

After only several months the group at Alt-Berdian was disbanded and the two Jacobs went to different locations. Jacob Thiessen was re-assigned to the Crimea. There the task of the 60-member group was to clear bush and build a road through the mountains from Simferopol to Yalta. It was difficult and exhausting work, all done by hand. Living conditions were also very primitive. The walls of the barracks were made of plaited branches smeared with mud and the roofs of woven straw, neither affording much protection from cold and rain. In his memoirs, Jacob recalled that it rained longer indoors than outdoors. The only furniture was a large table in the middle of the room and straw sacks on the ground for beds. Two members of the group served as cooks. The food was probably typical of other camps: bread with salt pork, onions, potatoes and tea.<sup>11</sup>

During his two years in the *Forsteidienst* Jacob began to correspond with his cousin, Tina Kornelsen. Evidently the correspondence was extensive, for Jacob had to endure considerable teasing on the part of the older teachers. Unfortunately, none of these letters has been preserved. As Easter of 1917 approached, Jacob wrote Tina, asking whether she would be his life's companion, and she agreed. Since he was able to return to Tiegenhagen for an Easter "vacation," a special engagement



*Katharina (Tina) Kornelsen of Tiegenhagen, Jacob Thiessen's cousin and future wife.*

celebration (*Verlobung*) was held on Easter Monday, April 3. Jacob's parents from Klippenfeld were present for the occasion. At this point, no one knew when the war would end and when the camp workers might be released from their obligations. Thus, Jacob and Tina had no idea when the wedding might take place—they realized they would have to wait.

### **February Revolution**

By early 1917 Russia was in tremendous turmoil. Industrial workers had carried out a number of very successful strikes to back demands for better working conditions. Many of them were very sympathetic to the revolutionary programs of Marxist groups such as the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Despite some state efforts at land reform in the years prior to 1917, peasants were still desperately poor. The small plots allotted to them could neither feed their families nor produce the income needed to pay exorbitantly high taxes. They too were demanding change. In addition, the war had taken a huge toll in human life and caused great food shortages for the Russian people. Whereas a strong and resolute monarch might have been able to maintain control of this turbulent situation, Nicholas II was anything but that.

In March 1917, the capital city of Petrograd was again the scene of riots due to the shortage of bread and coal. Reserve battalions were sent out to quell the protest. But instead of following orders, the soldiers,

themselves hungry and disillusioned, began to fraternize with the protestors. State officials went into hiding and authority collapsed. On March 11, members of the Duma created a provisional government. Alexander Kerensky, the sole socialist in the new cabinet, was named minister of justice; by July he would be prime minister. On March 15, Nicholas II abdicated the throne, thus ending the 300-year rule of the Romanov dynasty in Russia.

The new Provisional Government was quickly recognized and hailed by the United States, Canada and other western democracies. In short order it undertook a number of democratic reforms that pointed Russia on the road to liberal democracy. All citizens were granted equality before the law. Freedom of religion, speech, press and assembly became legal. Local administration was fashioned on a more democratic basis. Labour legislation introduced an eight-hour workday for some groups of workers. The government also made plans for the election of a fully democratic constituent assembly. The fact that it did not act more quickly on this last promise contributed to its downfall. By the time the assembly finally met, in October 1917, the Bolsheviks had gained control of Russia.

For those eight months of 1917, while the Provisional Government held power, many Mennonites became more optimistic about their future. One reason for this was the government's more conciliatory policy towards minorities. Another perhaps more important factor was the government's early decision to suspend implementation of the anti-German land liquidation laws for the duration of the war or until a constituent assembly could meet.<sup>12</sup>

Like many other younger Mennonites, Jacob Thiessen was encouraged by the political developments sweeping Russia.<sup>13</sup> He rejoiced at the new freedoms of speech and press, recalling the presence of Russian police and even spies at Mennonite meetings. He was also excited by the possibilities of a government more responsive to the needs of the poor. The influence of his teacher K.A. Wiens, who had introduced Jacob to the sorry state of Russian workers in Halbstadt, was partly responsible for this. It is also likely that Jacob's experience in the *Forsteidienst* had radicalized him to an extent. Travelling to and from his assigned stations, he had become conscious of the grinding poverty of Russian peasants, and had lived in circumstances and eaten food not unlike that which the peasants considered their daily fare.<sup>14</sup> He was not one of those who denounced Mennonite wealth in the face of Russian poverty; neither was he attracted to calls for a radical redistribution of wealth, as the revolutionaries demanded. Nevertheless, the plight of the Russian masses had begun to bother him a great deal.

In June 1917 the Provisional Government released all teachers from military and alternative service, and Jacob returned to Tiegenhagen where he resumed his teaching duties in September. At the time of his return there was much lively debate within Molotschna about Mennonite relations with the Provisional Government, a debate that was also occurring in other Mennonite colonies. Plans were already underway for a special congress of representatives from all over Russia to help shape the Mennonite position on various aspects of civic life—minority legal status, land redistribution, schools, publications, etc. To Jacob's great surprise, he was elected as Tiegenhagen representative to this important meeting, beating out an older and well-respected resident.

The Congress was held August 14–18, 1917 in Orloff and the spirit was optimistic. Delegates were excited about new possibilities and eagerly discussed ways of strengthening and expanding their schools, creating a permanent Mennonite press, and building a legal organization that could represent the entire constituency before government. They also grappled with how Mennonites might participate effectively in the promised elections for the constituent assembly and in a progressive land reform program that would benefit poor and landless peasants. Historian John B. Toews has noted that the discussion regarding Mennonite and Russian landless peasants generated “amazingly socialistic debates on the redivision and nationalization of land even though over half of those present were landowners.”<sup>15</sup>

Attending the Orloff Congress was Jacob's first experience at such a large Mennonite conference. He was very conscious of being one of the youngest delegates. At age 23 he was only one of a handful of men under 30 in attendance.<sup>16</sup> He sensed the tensions that were emerging between “fathers and sons”—that is, between an older generation of men which wanted to preserve traditions and a younger generation which advocated adapting to new realities. A term that was sometimes used to refer to youthful radicals was “young Turks.” Whether Jacob saw himself as a “young Turk” or as a bridgebuilder between the generations, a role that he would play in the future, is unclear from the materials available.

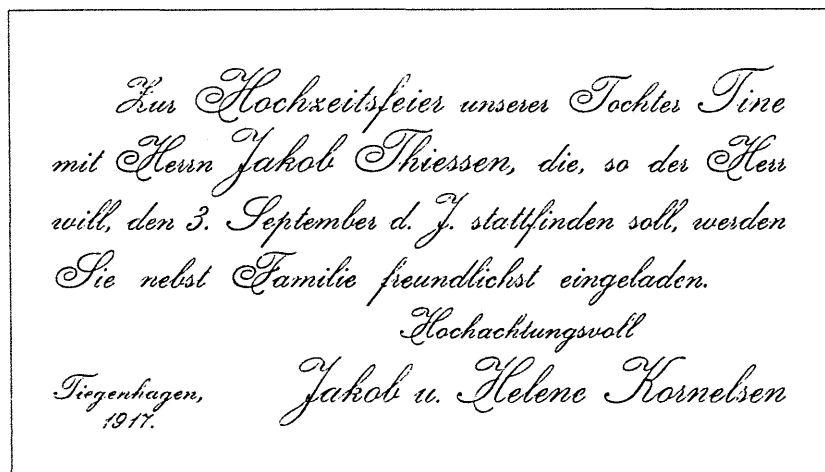
Jacob revelled in the experience of the Congress. He loved meeting new people and especially appreciated the opportunity to interact with some leading men in the Mennonite community. He found the speeches inspiring and the discussions invigorating. Moreover, he was intrigued by the decision-making process and the role of the conference *Vorsitzender* (chairperson) in guiding the gathering through its deliberations. In many ways, the Congress provided him with an important lesson in leadership training.

**Marriage**

Just a month after the Orloff Congress, Jacob Thiessen and Tina Kornelsen were married in Tiegenhagen. They had begun to plan the wedding soon after Jacob's return from forestry service in June. Since most engagements lasted only a few weeks, theirs was rather long. In all likelihood, they decided to delay the wedding until September so that Jacob could spend the summer helping his father with the farm in Klippenfeld, and perhaps also because in September the Tiegenhagen teacherage would become available to them.

Among Russian Mennonites of the day, marriage was a given. Very few individuals remained single all their lives. Marriage was like a right of passage—another marker on the road from youth to adulthood. It was probably around this time that Jacob became known more commonly as JJ (for Jacob Johann) rather than Jacob or Jasch (the low German equivalent). Mature men were generally referred to by their initials rather than their first names. Since the pool of first names used by Mennonites was quite limited, the use of initials provided a more specific designation. (From this point on, we will also refer to Jacob as JJ.)

Tina Kornelsen was the second youngest of the five surviving children of Jacob and Helena Martens Kornelsen. Born on December 5, 1893, she was only a few months younger than JJ. The Kornelsen sisters were known for their striking looks and, like the others, Tina was quite beautiful with penetrating blue eyes and soft brown hair.<sup>17</sup> As a young girl, she had excelled academically and longed to attend the *Mädchen-*



*The invitation to Jacob Thiessen and Tina Kornelsen's wedding.*

*schule* in Halbstadt. For whatever reasons—perhaps inadequate family finances or simply a bias against higher education for girls—this was not possible, and her dream for a high school education remained unfulfilled. Tina was very gifted artistically and found ways to develop and use those gifts despite the lack of formal education beyond village school. A friend in Tiegenhagen had taught her how to design clothing and to sew, and thereafter she made clothes for herself and others. She also became adept at very fine needlework, particularly crocheting and embroidery. Her Christian faith was very important to her and she was baptized at age 19 in June 1913.

The wedding was simple and followed customary Mennonite practice. The evening before, young people gathered to clean and decorate a wagon shed—weddings were not held in the church—with garlands, flowers and ribbons, and to participate in the traditional *Polterabend*. The young people performed a number of humorous skits and songs, and JJ himself shared a recitation entitled “Meister Strumpf.” Most of the gifts presented to the couple were quite small and simple since the war had brought with it financial difficulties. A special gift from students of the Tiegenhagen school was a wall clock.<sup>18</sup>

Before retiring that night, JJ shared some intimate moments with his mother Margareta who, together with the rest of the Thiessen family, had travelled to Tiegenhagen for the wedding festivities. JJ and his mother had always been very close. Now, on a lovely moon-lit summer’s evening, they walked together in the garden of the Kornelsen family home. According to JJ her words were, “as a mother to her son who was about to enter into marriage.”<sup>19</sup> She also shared with him a verse of scripture that she hoped would guide him and Tina in their married life: “Blessed are they who hear the word of God and obey it (Luke 11:28).”<sup>20</sup>

The following day, September 16, 1917 (Gregorian calendar), JJ and Tina were married. He wore his best used suit; she wore a white dress she had sewn from Chinese silk brought from Siberia by her sister Helena. The marriage ceremony was performed by Ältester Gerhard Harder from Halbstadt, a friend of the Kornelsen family. JJ did not know Harder and would have preferred his former teacher, Ältester Abram Klassen, but he deferred to the wishes of the Kornelsen family. The ceremony was followed by a lunch of coffee, *Zwieback* (two-layered buns) and *Rosinenstritzel* (raisin bread) baked by the village women. Due to wartime shortages, JJ had travelled 20 kilometres to purchase some good coffee. After the lunch, benches and tables were moved aside so that the young folks could join in traditional “circle games.” These “games” were much like folk dances, although many people took great pains to distinguish them from dancing. The festivities ended when Tina threw



*Jacob and Tina on their wedding day, September 3, 1917 (Julian calendar).*

her bouquet into the crowd of young single women; the one who caught it was considered next in line for marriage.

According to JJ's memoirs, the difficult times necessitated a simple and inexpensive wedding. Although Mennonites were much better off than their Russian peasant neighbours, they nevertheless felt the burden of war-triggered inflation and the growing cost of supporting the men in the *Forsteidienst*. Families whose husbands, fathers and brothers were still mobilized obviously suffered the most. JJ and Tina were able to exchange wedding rings; he even managed to purchase a set of gold earrings as a gift for her. Sales from an exceptionally good crop of plums that year helped the Kornelsen family pay for some of the weddings costs.<sup>21</sup>

A few days after the wedding JJ and Tina moved into the teacherage of the Tiegenhagen school and began their married life. Unfortunately, we know very little of their relationship during their early years together.

We do know that within the Mennonite world, as well as within the larger society, there were very distinct gender roles for men and women. It was understood that, as the husband, JJ would function as head of the household and Tina as a helpmate and support. In all likelihood, JJ and Tina assumed these roles unquestioningly.

In many ways, they complemented one another. While Tina was quiet and reserved, JJ was a gregarious extrovert whose passion was meeting new people. While Tina shunned the limelight, JJ was quite comfortable with a public role. While Tina had an eye for beauty and artistry and a gift for music, JJ had few such inclinations or talents. While Tina was practical and realistic in her approach to life, JJ was the ever-confident optimist. However, they did share some qualities. Each of them possessed a sense of poise and dignity, some of which related to how they dressed, but mostly to their personal bearing. Both of them prized order and neatness and organization. They shared a similar set of values about hard work, thrift and honesty and a deeply grounded Christian faith. The particular blend of similarities and dissimilarities that JJ and Tina brought into their married life proved to be a good mix. They enjoyed each other's company, saw one another as partners (despite their differing roles), and understood that their marriage was to last until the death of one or the other.

Since their fathers were half-brothers, JJ and Tina were like cousins. It was not that uncommon for first or second cousins to choose to marry one another. Because Mennonites lived in close-knit isolated communities and because marriage with non-Mennonites was disallowed by the church, it was sometimes difficult for young people of marrying age to find a potential partner to whom they were *not* related. Were JJ and Tina at all concerned that future children might bear some physical abnormality because of their blood relationship? The only indication that this might have been the case is the fact that they chose a hospital birth for their two oldest children when that practice was still very uncommon.

Not quite a year after the wedding, on August 23, 1918, Tina gave birth to their first child, a boy, in the Muntau hospital. According to custom, the parents named him Jacob, after his father. Little Jacob's birth brought his parents much joy, a joy that was tempered by the increasing violence and political uncertainty surrounding the young family.

### **Revolution and Civil War**

Through the fall of 1917 there was growing discontent with the Kerensky Provisional Government, its failure to conclude the war with Germany and its delay in implementing land reform and convening the promised constituent assembly. On the warfront, soldiers were confused



and demoralized and refused to fight. In the countryside, angry peasants began to take matters into their own hands and appropriate land on their own. In the key cities of Petrograd and Moscow, socialist Bolsheviks came to dominate the increasingly radical workers' soviets by initiating several abortive uprisings. A series of cabinet crises attested to the weakness of the Provisional Government. On the night of November 7, Bolshevik-led soldiers stormed the weakly defended Winter Palace in Petrograd and arrested members of the Provisional Government. The Bolshevik Revolution had begun.

The new government, under the chairmanship of Vladimir Lenin, quickly set about transforming Russia politically, socially and economically into a communist state. Control of factories was handed over to workers' committees. Peasants were allowed to seize land, livestock and machinery; eventually legal mechanisms were put in place to facilitate this redistribution of wealth. Foreign trade became a state monopoly and banks were nationalized. Titles and rank disappeared, with members of the upper and middle classes losing property and suffering discrimination. Church property was confiscated and religious instruction in schools was banned. A new secret police force, the Cheka, spied on and eliminated counter-revolutionaries.

Widespread discontent in many sectors of Russian society had allowed the Bolsheviks to seize power initially, but they had to fight to consolidate that power throughout Russia. Between 1918 and 1921 a cruel civil war pitted Bolshevik forces, known as the Red Army, against counter-revolutionary forces, somewhat misleadingly referred to as the White Army. In southern Russia, Mennonites found themselves in the middle of the battleground as a warfront see-sawed back and forth across the colonies. It was said that some villages changed hands more than 20 times. Mennonites were also frequent victims of attacks by anarchists and bandits who took advantage of the political uncertainty by exacting their own measure of "justice."

Most Mennonites were totally unprepared for the drastic changes that the Bolshevik Revolution would initiate, but they soon felt the impact of the new order. Thefts and assaults on estate owners increased dramatically. Many families living on estates vacated them and moved in with relatives or friends in the colony villages. By early January 1918 Bolshevik troops reached the colony of Chortitza where they searched houses and took the provisions of wealthy Mennonite factory owners and business persons.<sup>22</sup> On February 5, the Red Army arrived in Molotschna, replacing Mennonite district and village committees with local councils or soviets, consisting of poorer, propertyless and mostly Russian individuals. Immediately, food, household goods, cattle, horses and agricultural

machinery were requisitioned, often at gunpoint. In Halbstadt, a crisis erupted when the newly formed soviet arrested and executed six men, four of them leaders in the community. Eight others, who also were arrested, were released after a few days. The “Halbstadt Days,” as they became known in folk memory, proved a turning point for many Mennonites. Thereafter, general anxiety was replaced by fear and terror.

Mennonites feared not only Red Army troops. Various peasant-based armed groups were active in the countryside, stealing food, livestock and personal valuables, and raping women and girls. The most highly organized of these groups was the military force led by Nestor Makhno. Mennonites who bore the brunt of Makhno’s attacks, and Mennonite historians who later wrote about him, generally portrayed him as the wild and degenerate commander of a motley band of murderous and thieving bandits. More objective scholars have described Makhno as an influential revolutionary with highly organized fighting units and a definite political program: the establishment of a peasant utopia.<sup>23</sup> Wherever the truth lies, Makhno’s forces nevertheless inflicted great suffering on the Mennonite colonists, as they engaged in murder, robbery, pillage and rape over a period of several years.

Early in 1918, the Soviet government negotiated a peace agreement with Germany which allowed German forces to enter and occupy the south. These troops entered Halbstadt on April 19. Despite the Mennonites’ eagerness to deny their affinity with Germany at the outset of the war, they now welcomed the Germans as liberators.

During the German occupation, Mennonites experienced a reprieve from the drastic changes of the Soviet government. Those villages which had been given new Russian names by the Bolsheviks reverted back to their former German names. The old municipal and village governments were restored. Churches and schools operated once again without hindrance. With some assistance from local people, German forces were even able to recover some goods that had been taken forcibly from wealthier Mennonites. Later on this last measure proved particularly disastrous for Mennonites.<sup>24</sup>

A very significant development within the Mennonite colonies during the German occupation, particularly in Molotschna, was the formation of an armed para-military security force named the *Selbstschutz* (self-defence force). It had its roots in the decision of many villages to hire armed watchmen to protect people and property from bandits and robbers. But the German troops also actively recruited, equipped and trained young Mennonites for defensive duty. In April 1918 a meeting of the Halbstadt district determined that an organized security force was a necessity. By early May units had been established in several Molotschna

villages, including Halbstadt, Gnadenfeld, Tiege and Tiegenhagen, as well as the Lutheran German village of Prischib. Later in the year, when the German withdrawal was imminent, a formal organizational meeting was held. At its zenith, the *Selbstschutz* numbered some 3000 men.<sup>25</sup>

The formation of the *Selbstschutz* was a most controversial issue within the Mennonite community, since it contravened the long-standing conviction that, as pacifist Christians, Mennonites could not bear arms. The issue received lengthy and vigorous debate at a conference of Mennonite congregations held June 30–July 2, 1918 at Lichtenau. A wide range of views was expressed. On the one hand, some people reaffirmed the traditional understanding of Christ's teachings on non-violence, viewing the *Selbstschutz* as a total abdication of that principle. Others regarded it as a simple act of defence, quite distinct from participation in military service. Some were worried about the reaction of Russian neighbours to the existence of an antagonistic armed force, while others were anxious that there would be repercussions from the German occupation force if Mennonites did not participate in defence. Because of the deep division of opinion, the Lichtenau conference concluded with a compromise. Officially, it reaffirmed the confession of nonresistance based on the life and teachings of Jesus, but it also advocated tolerance for those who chose to join the *Selbstschutz*. Participants did not receive the blessing of the Lichtenau gathering, but they could be assured that the church would take no disciplinary measures against them.

How did all of this affect the people of Tiegenhagen, JJ in particular? As already mentioned, the village was one of the first to organize a *Selbstschutz* unit, with some 30 young men joining in fairly short order. Several were friends and former students of JJ's, some were the sons of neighbours, some were Tina's relatives.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the summer and fall of 1918 the unit practised drills and manoeuvres, and on at least one occasion the units from Halbstadt, Ladekopp and Muntau joined the Tiegenhagen unit for manoeuvres near Tiegenhagen. At a German festival in Halbstadt, members of the village's *Selbstschutz* provided a display of gymnastics.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that JJ Thiessen himself did not join the *Selbstschutz*. A number of factors suggest that he agreed with the position that emerged from the Lichtenau conference, on the one hand, reaffirming the principle of nonresistance and, on the other hand, refusing to condemn those who opted to join the *Selbstschutz*. First of all, two of the persons instrumental in formulating the Lichtenau compromise were men he respected highly: Jacob H. Janzen, teacher at the Orloff *Mädchenschule*, and Abram Klassen, *Ältester* of the Halbstadt congregation. At the conference,

Janzen had argued that Mennonites had two choices: either they reject all bearing of arms (including the use of armed night watchmen) or leave the matter of nonresistance to individual conscience.<sup>28</sup> At the conclusion of the conference, Ältester Klassen had presented a resolution which affirmed nonresistance as the highest Christian ideal, but which advocated tolerance for dissenters, that is, those who opted to join the *Selbstschutz*.<sup>29</sup> JJ respected both of these men highly.

There are other reasons for believing that JJ did not speak out publicly against the *Selbstschutz*. He was a people person. He treasured personal relationships highly and tried to stay on good terms with everyone. Although he might have disagreed with those who chose the *Selbstschutz*, it is doubtful that he challenged them personally.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, JJ was someone who was committed to unity within the family, the church and the Mennonite peoplehood. He frequently took a position of moderation or mediation between more extreme views. If this meant he conveyed a degree of ambivalence at times, he could live with that.

Many decades later in Canada, JJ was asked to address a conference on the controversial topic of the *Selbstschutz*. He chose to decline, his response being, “Opinions regarding this historic moment in our Russian history vary greatly. While some condemn, thousands of others are thankful for the help received. The organization has fulfilled a task and only God knows if it has done right or wrong.”<sup>31</sup> These words, written by JJ more than 50 years after the existence of *Selbstschutz*, corroborate the position he seems to have taken at a much younger age.

By late 1918 Germany had lost the war against the Allies. The peace armistice, signed on November 11, called for German troops to withdraw from all areas of occupied Eastern Europe, and by the end of the month they were retreating from southern Russia. For Mennonites, the relative calm of the summer and fall was rapidly waning. Soon the civil war would once again overwhelm the colonies.

In the wake of the German withdrawal, White Army forces led by General Denikin moved north and took uncertain control of the region. The threat of attack by Makhno’s units plunged the *Selbstschutz* into action. In December its forces engaged the Makhnovists at Chernigovka just to the east of Molotschna and not far from Klippenfeld. Between December 1918 and March 1919, the small army of Mennonites, occasionally fighting alongside White Army troops, kept Makhno at bay. By early March 1919, however, Red Army troops advancing from the north reached Molotschna and decisively defeated the *Selbstschutz*. Members of the short-lived defence force fled or went into hiding.

Residents of the Molotschna villages may have felt a measure of safety under the protection of the *Selbstschutz*, but now they had good

reason to be terrified. The Red Army victory unleashed a period of unprecedented horror through the colony. Although government troops were generally more disciplined than Makhno's fighters, they frequently allowed the Makhnovists to go on rampages, raping, murdering and plundering as they wished. Some Red forces engaged in similar atrocities, although most simply went about forcibly requisitioning food, animals and valuables. Mennonites were made to pay for their collaboration with German invaders, for their association with the White Army and for the actions of the *Selbstschutz*.

On numerous occasions the terror reached into the village of Tiegenhagen and the Thiessen household. One episode occurred in early March 1919 after the defeat of the *Selbstschutz*. Fearing reprisals from the Red Army, many people from the northern and western villages of the Molotschna colony began to evacuate. Hundreds tried to board south-bound trains for the Crimea; others escaped to the homes of relatives and friends elsewhere. JJ, Tina and little Jacob also fled under cover of darkness one night for the home of friend and fellow teacher, Saloman Ediger in the village of Tiede. They spent several days there before returning home, concerned about the cow on which they depended for milk. They returned home to find the teacherage pretty much in order. The only thing missing was a medal commemorating the 300th anniversary of the Romanov reign. The neighbours were not nearly so fortunate—many homes had been ransacked and plundered. Evidently, a member of the local soviet had advised Red Army troops not to disturb the teacher's dwelling since he was "a friend of the poor."<sup>32</sup>

A short time later Red Army soldiers appeared in Tiegenhagen searching for Gerhard Penner, the husband of Tina Thiessen's older sister, Helena. Penner had served in the *Selbstschutz*, possibly even as a commander. When the soldiers located him, they promptly arrested him and took him away. Filled with anxiety, Helena, her father and JJ hurried off to Halbstadt, hoping to find Penner detained in the town jail. When he was not there, they continued on to Tokmak, but again their hopes were dashed and they returned dejectedly to Tiegenhagen. On the third day after Penner's disappearance, a tip took JJ and his father-in-law to a farm near Halbstadt where several soldiers, with Penner in tow, had reportedly demanded a meal two nights previously. Out on the steppe, they found some papers belonging to Penner. This discovery struck fear into their hearts. They knew that the Bolsheviks had already executed a number of *Selbstschutz* veterans and they presumed that Penner had been killed nearby.

Over the summer the White Army gained control of Molotschna, and the people of Tiegenhagen learned what had actually happened to

Penner. Returning to the place where the papers had been found, JJ and a few others located a Russian shepherd boy who knew the story. He told them that the soldiers had in fact shot Penner out on the steppe, and then had bribed him into burying Penner's body with the promise of a sack of flour. The boy led the searchers to a shallow grave where they found the decomposed body and identified it as Gerhard Penner's. With great solemnity the body was brought home and given a decent burial in the Tiegenhagen cemetery. Besides his wife Helena, Penner left behind four young sons. His death represented the first of many "sacrifices" in the Thiessen-Kornelsen family circle.<sup>33</sup>

In the fall of 1919, the White Army once again retreated in the face of Red advances. This ushered in another period of terrible violence, death and destruction for Mennonites at the hands of the Makhnovists. Between late September and mid-December, 250 people were killed in Chortitza and Iazykovo colonies and 75 in Schoenfeld-Brazol. On the night of October 26 a massacre at Eichenfeld-Dubovka left 82 persons dead. Zgradovka colony was also the scene of a gruesome massacre. Over a three-day period, a total of 200 people, including 98 from only one village, were brutally murdered. Besides indiscriminate killing, the Makhnovists raped hundreds of women and girls, and stole money, valuables, and farm and household goods.

In Molotschna, the Makhnovists' worst attack occurred in early to mid-November. To avenge the killing of four of their men by White Army soldiers and possibly former *Selbstschutz* participants, the Makhnovists descended on the village of Blumenort. They imprisoned, then murdered, 14 men in the basement of the village store before setting the store on fire. Just prior to their deaths, a local teacher named J. J. Epp ventured before the leader of the bandits, pleading that the imprisoned men be spared. He was ruthlessly shot. Epp was a good friend and colleague of JJ's since they had worked together in the *Forsteidiens*t in the Crimea. The following day the Makhnovists returned and killed five more men.

In the days following the Blumenort massacre, anarchist reinforcements also attacked the nearby villages of Orloff, Altonau and Tiegenhagen. In Tiegenhagen three men were killed: Kornelius Woelk, John Nickel and David Harder, while again women were raped and homes looted.<sup>34</sup> On this occasion JJ and Tina also experienced a close brush with death. While many of the neighbours had evacuated in anticipation of the Makhno attack, the Thiessens, Tina's nephew and another teacher named Abram Rempel, remained at the schoolhouse. From behind locked doors and shuttered windows, they heard the bandits vandalize the neighbours' home.

Soon a loud knock sounded on the door of the teacherage. JJ answered it and several heavily armed men entered. Initially they demanded money and JJ obliged. They then began searching the building for other valuables and soon came upon a bushel of apples in the attic, intended for Christmas. When JJ offered one bandit an apple, the man became enraged and began to beat, whip and kick him. A second bandit struck him hard on the head with his sabre. If JJ had not been wearing a hat, the cut may in fact have proved fatal. Ordering him to remain in the attic, the bandits now announced they would “attend” to Tina. Knowing they meant to rape her, JJ stumbled down the steps, causing them to scream and curse viciously. All of this was heard by Tina’s nephew who was outside, holding the bandits’ horses as they had commanded him. Terrified by the commotion, the nephew ran off, abandoning the horses. The bandits in turn heard the distress of the horses and dashed outside, forgetting about JJ and Tina. For a time they pursued the nephew, but then moved on. Fearing that the men might return during the night, Tina insisted that the family vacate the schoolhouse right away. So they made their way to the home of a Konrad family who lived behind the woodlot to the rear of the school. The Konrads owned a small workshop that made and repaired automobile springs and housed some of the workers nearby. JJ knew the workers well and had often written the minutes for their meetings. Presumably, the Thiessens felt that here among the “proletariat” they would be safe from further attacks. Upon their arrival, JJ was advised to hide in the hayloft where he remained until nighttime, meditating, praying and also receiving the comfort of Mennonite Brethren Minister Peter Kornelsen. After dark JJ joined the rest of the family in the Konrad home and Neta Konrad tended to his wounds. The following morning workers from the workshop brought JJ to the Muntau hospital where he stayed for a week.<sup>35</sup>

Although JJ and Tina had already witnessed much death and destruction, this was their first personal encounter with the terror of the Makhnovists. It was a deeply harrowing experience but they were grateful to have been spared rape and death. At a certain level, JJ was also thankful for the experience. All around him, family members, friends and neighbours had suffered terribly, yet he and Tina had been spared serious trauma. Men had been killed, women had been raped, homes had been destroyed—and he and Tina had lost only an old Russian medal. Until this time, JJ struggled with no small measure of guilt, wondering why he was found “unworthy” to suffer along with others. This experience laid that guilt to rest.

This episode was formative in developing JJ’s understanding and theology of suffering. He believed deeply that God had intervened to

protect him and his family from greater harm. Yet he also believed that God had allowed the life-threatening event to happen. He was convinced there was divine purpose in the suffering and cross-bearing that was being demanded of the Mennonites. He did not believe, as some did, that the anguish was intended as retribution for sin. He nevertheless came to regard life's sufferings and sorrows—just as its joys—as somehow enfolded in the mystery and grace of God.<sup>36</sup> As they saw it, God's grace could save them from harm; God's grace could also uphold and strengthen them in the midst of harm.

JJ and Tina lived through other frightening experiences before the civil war finally ended. One likely occurred in the spring of 1920. The Red Army had been in control of the area for a number of weeks; their local command was in fact quartered in the village school which was attached to the teacherage. One day, when the officers seemed more agitated than usual, JJ lay down on the floor, with his ear to the door. He overheard that another White Army offensive was underway and the Reds were planning to retreat. Before long, a group of Red Army soldiers entered the teacherage and began to accuse JJ of making White Army flags in anticipation of the arrival of the Whites. While a number of them searched the dwelling for flags—unsuccessfully—six others surrounded JJ with their guns cocked. Several times the commander screamed at JJ, “You will not live to witness the arrival of the White—the bullet will pass through your head first.”<sup>37</sup>

It seems that JJ's quick response saved him in this instance. In his fluent Russian, he reportedly told the Red commander that he had not helped his students prepare flags for the White Army. Rather, they had taken old Tsarist flags and transformed them into Red ones so that they could join the upcoming May Day parade in Halbstadt. Whether this was a truthful statement is unknown, but the commander must have been convinced for he looked at JJ, momentarily dumbfounded, and then replied, “You are free.” Some months later, two teacher friends from the village of Schoensee told JJ that Red Army soldiers had informed them of their intent to kill the teacher at Tiegenhagen. Once again he had narrowly escaped death.

As the above incident demonstrates, JJ knew how to choose words that would disarm his accusers and convince them that he was on their side. Secondly, there was certainly enough evidence to demonstrate to the Reds that he was not a true counter-revolutionary. He was known as a friend of the village poor, he had close connections with some of the workers in the community, and he had even participated for a brief time on the village soviet. Moreover, as a teacher, he was part of a sector of society that was generally considered to be more sympathetic to the goals



of the revolution. At some level the Bolsheviks could trust him as someone who would not actively work against them. According to one source, when the Bolsheviks later demanded that the Mennonites turn in all weapons, JJ arranged that this be done anonymously through him.<sup>38</sup> The people of Tiegenhagen delivered any weapons they possessed to the school, and he in turn handed them over to the officials without revealing the names of the owners. He obviously had gained the confidence of both the villagers and the Bolshevik officials.

### **Family Life**

By the end of 1920 the Red Army had finally defeated the White Army, disarmed the Makhnovists and gained control of the region of southern Russia. A measure of peace returned to the Mennonite colonies and to the area generally, but the difficulties were far from over. Soon widespread famine would bring the colonies once more to their knees. In the small space of relative “normalcy” between war and famine, JJ and Tina tried as much as possible to carry on with their family life.

By the fall of 1920, young Jacob was two years old. He was a bright young boy who had learned to speak at an early age. With his precocious chatter and outgoing manner, he endeared himself not only to the Tiegenhagen villagers but also to the soldiers billeted in the village. Fascinated with his father’s life as a teacher, he often stood in the doorway between the teacherage and the classroom, keenly observing the goings-on. He especially enjoyed when the subject was singing. Imitating his father, he would wave his arms in the air as if also conducting a choir.

On October 17, 1920 Tina gave birth to a daughter in the Muntau hospital. The new baby was named Hedwig Evelyn, although she quickly became “Hedie” in the minds of her parents and relatives. Little Jacob was quite fascinated with his new baby sister and loved to perch himself on the rockers of her cradle, watching her and rocking gently with her.<sup>39</sup>

For the next several months life unfolded rather uneventfully, but by the spring of 1921 it all began to unravel in a new round of troubles. First of all, JJ’s mother Margareta became very ill with cancer. Hoping she might improve in a different environment, she came to stay for a time with Tina and JJ in Tiegenhagen. While she was there, the family consulted with Dr. Tavonious, the well-respected physician at the Muntau hospital. But little could be done. Soon after, JJ took his mother back to the family home in Klippenfeld where she died in June after a period of great suffering. Her death was a tremendous blow to JJ. Although he had not spent much time with his parents in the last few years, the special bond that united him with his mother had remained strong. Now she was gone.

Only a month after the death of Margareta Thiessen, little three-year-old Jacob suddenly became very ill with dysentery. After only a few days, he died on July 20. JJ and Tina were devastated by the tragic and sudden loss of their precious son. It was one thing to lose a mother; it was quite another to be robbed of a child, especially one that brought so much delight and demonstrated so much promise and potential. Occasionally, JJ heard others explain their son's death by saying, "He was too smart and too good for this world." In his memoirs, JJ recalled that Jacob's death caused him to lash out in anger at God. When his anger was spent, he bargained with God, pleading that God return this one child and then he, JJ, would not ask for any other children.<sup>40</sup> We have no record of how Tina struggled with her sorrow and loss; we can only surmise that, as little Jacob's mother, she may have felt the loss even more profoundly than her husband. As a quiet and reserved woman, she probably bore much of her pain silently and stoically. Much later, her remaining children remembered that until their mother's death, she would always mark in some way the birthday and death anniversaries of her firstborn.

The Tiegenhagen community rallied around the Thiessens during their time of grief. Neighbours and friends and even Red Army troops billeted in the village quickly gathered to pay their respects. One of the soldiers, who had enjoyed playing with little Jacob, wept as he offered his condolences. JJ's teaching colleague, Abram Rempel, prepared an invitation to the funeral service and circulated it. Several men built a small casket which Tina lined with her white wedding gown. Women prepared food for the traditional meal after the funeral. A couple of days after the death, Minister Peter Kornelsen led a funeral service and little Jacob's body was laid to rest in the Tiegenhagen cemetery. These time-honoured familiar rituals supported and comforted the sorrowing family.

### **Famine**

At the time of little Jacob's death in July 1921, there were already indications of an impending food shortage. In the wake of the civil war, few draft animals were left—the district of Halbstadt had only one horse for every 12 people—and many of the remaining animals were weak due to illness and lack of feed. Consequently, many fields were only partially cultivated or not at all. A severe drought in the winter and spring of 1921 meant that, even where fields were seeded, the germination was very poor and yields extremely low. The quartering of soldiers and care of refugees from outlying areas had placed additional strains on the colony. On top of everything, the government had continued to requisition huge amounts of grain and other farm inventory, further weakening communities that otherwise might have sustained themselves. In some communi-

ties, including Tiegenhagen, hostages were taken when villages could not supply the required quantity of wheat.<sup>41</sup> By the fall of 1921 famine raged across Molotschna and beyond.

Already the previous year, Mennonites had organized a *Studienkommission* (study commission) and appointed its three members to travel abroad to seek help from fellow Mennonites for the war-devastated colonies in Russia. The three were all from the Molotschna colony: B.H. Unruh and A.A. Friesen were teachers at the Halbstadt *Kommerzschule*, and C.H. Warkentin was a merchant in the village of Waldheim. Their main mandate was to investigate the possibilities of a Mennonite migration to a more hospitable home, possibly in North America, but they were also to solicit relief aid from Mennonites abroad for the beleaguered brothers and sisters in Russia. As news of the rapid advance of the famine reached the *Studienkommission*, this secondary task took primacy. In response to its appeals, Mennonite relief committees were organized in Germany, Holland and the United States. The American committee, organized in September 1920, brought together representatives of six Mennonite groups and was appropriately named Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

That same fall MCC sent a group of three workers—Orie Miller, Arthur Slagel and Clayton Kratz—to southern Russia to investigate the situation and make recommendations for an appropriate response. In the course of their investigation, Kratz disappeared and was never seen again. It was assumed he had fallen into the hands of Red Army soldiers and, being mistaken for a spy, been executed. His disappearance was a chilling indicator of the ongoing political uncertainties and inherent dangers in providing aid. Although American Mennonites were eager to help, obstacles to getting their support into the region were enormous.

Several important documents, discovered by historian John B. Toews in the Mennonite Library and Archives in Newton, Kansas, shed much light on how the Halbstadt district in general and Tiegenhagen in particular were affected by the economic collapse and famine.<sup>42</sup> According to this document, at the outset of the war in 1914, some 112 Tiegenhagen families together cultivated a total of 1045 dessiatins; by 1920 this number had dropped to 680 and by 1921 to 254. Similarly, at the outset of the war, Tiegenhagen residents together possessed about 230 horses; by 1920 this number had dropped to 90 and by 1921 to 50. Two-thirds of the Tiegenhagen families had no horse at all.

By the fall of 1921 it became clear that there would be a severe shortage of grain over the coming winter. Some of the Molotschna villages decided to divide the meagre harvest among all the families—if rationed carefully this would sustain the community for about three

months.<sup>43</sup> It appears that Tiegenhagen was one of the villages to do so.<sup>44</sup> When there was no longer any wheat or rye, women baked bread from millet (usually used to make brooms), pumpkins and turnips. Others sold clothing, furniture or other items in Tokmak where a poor quality bread could be bought for a steep price. People ate wild greens and mushrooms, and also resorted to eating horses, crows, dead livestock and, in some cases, even cats and dogs. Through these means, the villagers were able to ward off starvation until the early months of 1922. Before relief aid arrived, Tiegenhagen reported five deaths due to starvation, while a total of 326 persons starved in the colony as a whole.<sup>45</sup>

As a teacher, JJ Thiessen saw the ravages of famine in the dull and listless eyes of his students. One student became so weak and malnourished he could no longer close his lips over his teeth—he eventually died. Another student died after eating poisonous mushrooms. Many young ones simply did not come to school because they were out begging or looking for food. As long as the Thiessens had any bread, they shared it with students, but the time came when they too ran out.<sup>46</sup> As the famine worsened, many schools were closed; in all likelihood the Tiegenhagen school did so as well.

JJ always remembered the last meal with bread, for it was a long time until he and Tina would eat the “staff of life” again. A teacher colleague had come for an overnight visit. Tina prepared some soup from two sugar beets and served it with the remaining slice of bread for the evening meal. She and JJ did not touch the bread, leaving it for their guest. The next morning the guest finished the final morsel, commenting, “How is it that everyone else must ration their bread and in your home it is not the case?”<sup>47</sup> Only much later did the guest learn that he had eaten the Thiessens’ last bit of bread. JJ and Tina were fortunate in that they had a cow; if they had no bread they at least had milk to provide some nourishment.

Another vivid experience took place one cold winter morning at the height of the famine. The sounds of someone crying drew JJ to the neighbours’ yard. He discovered the body of a Gypsy man who had died of starvation. A young boy and girl, nearly frozen, were huddled next to the body and sobbing loudly. JJ took the children into the schoolhouse where Tina warmed them by the fire and gave them food. The village arranged to bury the father in the local cemetery and to care for the children until the next Gypsy caravan travelled through the community. The incident was a grim reminder that, among their Russian neighbours, circumstances were a good deal worse than among the Mennonites.

In early March 1922 Alvin Miller, director of American Mennonite Relief (AMR), as the Mennonite Central Committee program was called,



*Starvation took the lives of more than 300 Molotschna residents in 1922. Many more would have died without the timely relief aid of Mennonite Central Committee. Photo: MHCA*

finally received permission to begin a feeding operation in southern Russia. It was understood that ethnic Russians, and not only Mennonites, would be fed. By the end of the month AMR kitchens were operating in all 60 villages of Molotschna and elsewhere. Generally, the kitchens provided one daily ration to children under the age of 15, adults over the age of 60, the sick, and pregnant and nursing mothers. The food consisted of a heavy biscuit and bowl of rice or corn-grits cooked with milk and sugar. A thick cocoa was served twice a week and beans occasionally. At the peak of feeding operation in June 1922 AMR was feeding 25,000 people daily.<sup>48</sup>

AMR also came to the rescue of the people of Tiegenhagen. In most villages the local school became the AMR kitchen, but in Tiegenhagen the old wagon wheel shop was transformed into a feeding station. Of Tiegenhagen's 538 residents, 233 or 43 percent received AMR rations. Nearly half of the recipients were children.<sup>49</sup> When compared to other villages in the Halbstadt district, this level of feeding support was about average. Some villages, such as Fuerstenau, fed up to 80 percent, while others, such as Orloff, fed only 18 percent of their population.

Tina Thiessen and little Hedio were among those fed by the AMR kitchen in Tiegenhagen. Each morning at about eleven o'clock they lined up with their bowls, spoons and ration cards along with other villagers and people from outlying areas. Tina was pregnant once again and therefore qualified to receive the ration which was not available to JJ. She always brought the food home and shared it with her husband. Little Hedio, not yet two years old, responded well to the nutritious food. Colour returned to her cheeks and she began to gain weight. For Tina, the recovery was much slower. The years of physical and emotional suffering had taken their toll and she had become very weak and frail. It would be some years before she regained full health and strength. One wonders

whether she might have recovered more quickly if she had eaten all the food intended for her.

The gift of food from American brothers and sisters meant a great deal to JJ and Tina, as it did to their neighbours. The food saved them from a certain death. It also represented a spiritual bond with American brothers and sisters in the faith. When the feeding operation began in Tiegenhagen, a special thanksgiving worship service was held at the village church.<sup>50</sup> A man named P.H. Unruh, pastor of a Mennonite Church in Kansas, brought greetings from fellow Mennonites in North America and spoke of the Old Testament story of God providing manna in the desert for the hungry people of Israel. Tears flowed freely as the people of Tiegenhagen offered their thanksgiving for the way God, through distant members of the family of faith, had provided for them in their hour of need. Like many Mennonite recipients of AMR aid, JJ and Tina would always hold a special place in their hearts for Mennonite Central Committee as a result of this timely rescue.

During this period, which JJ later referred to as “troubled times,” his faith, though tested severely, found a new depth. He believed that God could intervene to rescue people from harm, but he also recognized that, for reasons unknown to mortals, miraculous intervention and liberation oftentimes did not happen. He believed that God’s grace was at work in the midst of trials and tribulations, accomplishing purposes too great for human understanding. These “troubled times” had convinced many Mennonites that there was no longer a future for them in Russia and, by 1922, serious plans for a mass migration were underway. Ever the optimist, JJ still believed that the Mennonite faith could be preserved and the Mennonite way of life adapted under the new regime.

## 4

### 1922–1926

### Emigration

Between 1914 and 1922 the course of J.J. Thiessen's life had been shaped significantly by cataclysmic events of national and even international consequence. In the midst of these upheavals, he and Tina had fallen in love, had married and had begun their family life. On February 19, 1923 their family grew again, as Tina gave birth to a second daughter, Katherine Marie. If the young parents dared to believe that the birth of this new child was a portent of hope for better times, they were disappointed. Although there was improvement in the economic situation, developments in the areas of religious, educational and cultural life renewed people's fears for the future.

For JJ and for the Mennonites, the years 1922 to 1926 were again dominated by the momentous transformation taking place within Russia. The key question remained: Could they coexist with the Bolshevik regime in ways that ensured their survival as a people and as a faith community? In the end, many decided that such coexistence was not possible. Eventually, JJ made that same decision, but not before he assisted many others to depart their beloved homeland for a new home in distant Canada.

#### **Reasons for Emigration**

As early as 1919 there had been talk of emigration. The fact that many people were prepared to abandon Russia and begin a new life in a foreign land is not that surprising. Several times over their 400-year history, Mennonites had chosen to relocate when various pressures became too great. Just 50 years previously, 17,000 Mennonites, representing one-third of the Mennonite population in Russia at the time, had opted to move to Canada and the United States. By 1919, despite their love for Russia—or the Russia they had known prior to 1914—many others were now prepared to say farewell to the homeland and to move elsewhere.

The reasons that pushed people to consider emigrating were complex, varied from region to region and shifted in relative importance over time.<sup>1</sup> Initially, a very significant factor was the economic devastation that so many Mennonites had experienced. Most farmers had lost all their

farm animals and machinery, either through theft or government requisitions. Much of their land had been confiscated. Additionally, with village committees replaced by local soviets, most Mennonites were deprived of a role in local decision making. Wealthy land and estate owners had lost everything. As refugees, many of them had fled their estates and moved in with relatives and friends in the villages but, with no means of providing a livelihood, they were a burden to colonists already struggling to survive. Crop failures and famine provided the “last straw” that convinced many people that there was no economic future for them in the new Russia.

By 1922, however, the picture began to improve somewhat and there were signs that economic life in the colonies might be rebuilt. Two years of drought were followed by good rains in the fall of 1922. American Mennonite Relief assistance had prevented massive starvation and the provision of seed grain, horses and tractors had facilitated the reconstruction process. A new Mennonite organization, named *Verband der Bürger Holländischer Herkunft* (Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage) or simply *Verband*, had received approval to revitalize the agricultural sector. (The *Verband's* name was chosen quite deliberately to avoid drawing attention to the Mennonites as a religious and German-speaking people.) Most importantly, in 1921 the Soviet Government had initiated the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP represented a reprieve from the government's policy of “war communism” which was characterized by ruthless nationalization of land and industry and exorbitant requisitioning. Once again, individual rights were respected, private property was recognized and a certain amount of private trade was reintroduced. There was hope that the economic basis for Mennonite life might be restored.

But even while basic survival issues were of less concern, at least for the time being, the matter of religious freedom was becoming more urgent. Increasing restrictions on religious freedom convinced many Mennonites that “an ideological compromise with communism was impossible.”<sup>2</sup> A major concern was the fact that Mennonite exemption from military service was no longer recognized. Despite the formation of the *Selbstschutz* during the war, Mennonites as a whole, and in particular the religious leadership, remained committed to the principle of nonresistance and sought to preserve their historic privilege of exemption which Lenin had decreed for conscientious objectors in 1919. Local officials often failed to enforce this provision, perhaps because of memories of *Selbstschutz* activities, and thus from 1920 on many Mennonite men were inducted into the Red Army. Imprisonment and forced labour were frequently imposed where induction was refused. Over the years various leaders lobbied hard for new exemption arrangements



which were promulgated in a new military service law in 1925. From a Mennonite point of view, these arrangements were highly unsatisfactory.

Besides the military question, Mennonites were also deeply troubled by the Soviet regime's tightening constraints on the church. Ministers were stripped of their rights of citizenship and could no longer vote in any matters relating to the social or economic life of their communities. Taxes were imposed on churches for each minister who continued his ministerial functions. Moreover, persons who held church membership were disqualified from any form of civil service.

Perhaps most insidious for Mennonites was the attack on their schools. Soon after the revolution, Bolsheviks had outlawed religious instruction in schools. For a number of years there was considerable leniency, but by 1922 Soviet authorities dismissed Mennonite teachers who continued religious instruction in their classrooms. Any teachers who also served as ministers were dismissed from their posts if they did not relinquish their ministerial duties. By 1926, teachers were being compelled to teach an overtly anti-religious and atheist curriculum. As a teacher, JJ Thiessen was very much affected by these changes.

Besides issues of survival and religious liberty, the Mennonites' interest in emigration was also influenced by a deep sense that they as a people were no longer welcome in Russia. The attacks on their use of the German language, the break-up of their settlements through land redistribution, the general hostility to their religious faith and the threats to personal safety—all these communicated that their status as a minority group would no longer be tolerated and that the state was intent on total russification and assimilation. Russia was no longer the beloved "fatherland" that it once had been. While Soviet authorities regarded the proposed exodus as the escape of a reactionary sect not willing to adapt to a new social order, the majority of Mennonites saw it otherwise.

### **A New Home in Canada?**

Already on January 1, 1920, the *Studienkommission* had left for Europe and North America to appeal for relief aid and to investigate the possibilities of a mass Mennonite migration to a new and more hospitable home. The group explored settlement prospects in Germany, the United States, Mexico and Canada. A.A. Friesen, one of the four members of the *Studienkommission*, personally felt that Canada represented the best option. In June 1921, after extensive travels throughout North America, he alone returned to Canada to work with Canadian Mennonites on opening the doors to a major new migration.

The primary obstacle to such an immigration was a 1919 Order-in-Council issued by the Privy Council prohibiting the entry of any

Mennonites, Doukhobors and Hutterites. This order had been promulgated in response to rumours about a large scale migration of Hutterites from the United States. Preoccupied with the Winnipeg General Strike and widespread fears of communist infiltration, the government had acted swiftly to keep communally oriented groups like the Hutterites from settling in Canada. Mennonites and Doukhobors, who were pacifists like the Hutterites, were included as banned groups under the Order-in-Council. In the summer of 1912, a delegation of Mennonite leaders, along with A.A. Friesen, travelled to Ottawa to request the government authorities to rescind the order. Sir George Foster, acting prime minister in the Conservative government of Arthur Meighen, held out little hope of change, but Liberal opposition leader William Lyon Mackenzie King assured the delegation that, if his party won the upcoming election, his government would oblige. The delegation also consulted with railway officials about a possible credit arrangement for the momentous task of transporting up to 100,000 Mennonites from Russia.

In May 1922 the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, with representatives from eight Mennonite groups, was formed to expedite the work of the immigration. David Toews, *Ältester* of the Rosenort Mennonite Church in Rosthern, Saskatchewan, was elected chairperson, with A.A. Friesen hired as corresponding secretary. In early June, the new Liberal government of Mackenzie King followed through on its promise and rescinded the 1919 Order-in-Council. Later that month, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) notified Toews that it was prepared to finance, on credit, the movement of an initial group of Mennonites from Russia.

In this initial contract, the CPR was ready to dispatch two ships with a total capacity of nearly 3000 passengers to the Black Sea at a cost of \$400,000. Terms of payment stipulated that the initial 25 percent of total cost be paid within ten days, the second 25 percent in three months and the balance in six months; interest was to accrue at a rate of 6 percent per annum. These terms were really quite generous in comparison to those offered other immigrant groups. Nevertheless, Toews was reluctant to sign the contract because of growing opposition to the proposed migration on the part of many Canadian Mennonites and, concomitantly, a fear that the Board of Colonization would not be able to meet the financial obligations. Toews' own church, the Rosenort congregation, as well as the Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada of which it was a part, had many vocal opponents of the immigration scheme. In the end, Toews' concern for the Russian Mennonites and their desperate plight over-rode his hesitations and he signed the contract.

The hope was that the first groups of emigrants could leave Russia that very year, 1922. As it turned out, their departure was delayed a year.

A cholera epidemic broke out in southern Russia and the proposed port of departure, Odessa on the Black Sea, was placed under quarantine. CPR officials arranged for an overland route via Riga, Latvia, but then other health-related obstacles emerged. The Canadian government insisted that all potential immigrants pass a medical inspection at the point of departure, something which the Soviet government refused to permit. Eventually it was determined that emigrating Mennonites would be inspected in Latvia, with Germany providing temporary asylum for those not passing the inspection. Then there were new complications and the movement was called off for the year. The 3000 persons, ready to depart since mid-summer, were devastated by all the disappointments and setbacks. Throughout the winter their anxiety and discontent grew.

While the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization had oversight of the transportation to and resettlement of the migrants within Canada, it was the *Verband der Bürger Holländischer Herkunft* which made the arrangements within Russia. Led by former teacher and Mennonite Brethren minister B. B. Janz of Tiege, the *Verband* was granted a charter primarily for economic reconstruction work. But it also devoted enormous energy to facilitating the movement of those families and individuals who wished to leave the Soviet Union. Initially, the authorities regarded this exodus as something rather benign, possibly persuaded by Janz's argument that economic rehabilitation could only happen if the tremendous population pressures were alleviated by emigration. With time, the *Verband's* emigration activities became much more suspect, and Janz and other staff came under increasing surveillance by Soviet police.

Finally in July 1923 the initial group of 750 emigrants left Chortitza for Canada. It was a great disappointment that 10 percent of the group had to remain in Germany because they displayed symptoms of trachoma, a contagious eye disease. Nevertheless, the movement was finally underway. Over the course of the year, a total of 2759 Mennonites departed Russia for a new home in Canada.<sup>3</sup> This group consisted almost exclusively of landless refugees.

### **Echelon Leader**

In May 1924 JJ Thiessen received a letter from B.B. Janz asking if he would act as escort for several groups or echelons of emigrants and travel with them from their point of departure to Zebesh on the Latvian border. As in the previous year, the Russian government had agreed to allow the emigrants to exit as a group, rather than on the basis of individual passports. Therefore, it was deemed necessary that someone authorized by the *Verband* accompany the group to ensure that all was in order and

that passengers were not harassed. *Verband* officials hoped that JJ's involvement could prevent the delays and difficulties encountered by the 1923 emigrants to reach border. After an orientation meeting, JJ agreed to assist with the huge undertaking and signed his acceptance papers on June 5, 1924.<sup>4</sup>

Janz's letter of invitation to JJ has not been preserved so we can only speculate as to why he singled out the Tiegenhagen teacher for this very important and risky assignment. The two had first met at the Molotschna teachers' meeting in 1912 and had numerous encounters at other meetings and conferences, their most recent encounter probably being the delegate assembly of the *Verband* held at the beginning of March 1924 at Kalinovo (formerly Marienort) in the province of Donetz. JJ had been sent to the gathering as one of 12 representatives from the Halbstadt region and was promptly elected as one of the three conference chairpersons.<sup>5</sup> Janz must have been impressed with JJ's leadership abilities because his letter of invitation to JJ was sent soon after that event.

JJ was well suited for the role of chairperson: he was articulate in both German and Russian; he was comfortable in a public capacity; he was adept at keeping discussions moving and on time; and he could be most diplomatic, appealing to the sensibilities of persons with wide-ranging views. At age 30, he was taking on roles that were usually reserved for much older men.

JJ's assignment with the *Verband* necessitated that he be absent from home for extensive periods over the summer of 1924. Since school was closed over the summer months, leaving his work was not a problem. However, he did want to make arrangements for a helper for Tina. She was still not very strong and faced the challenge of caring for their two young daughters, attending to all the household work, the garden and the animals. JJ also did not want Tina and the girls to sleep alone in the teacherage at night. Although the banditry of earlier years had subsided, nighttime thefts were still fairly commonplace.

How did Tina feel about JJ taking on the assignment with the *Verband*? Perhaps she already sensed that he had a special calling to serve the Mennonite people and that this would require enormous amounts of time and energy—time and energy that would take him away from his family. Perhaps she already understood that her responsibility was to free him for this exceptional calling and that this would require sacrifice on her part. Perhaps she already viewed her own supportive role as part of the larger calling of her husband. These understandings were certainly an integral part of her self-identity later on.<sup>6</sup>

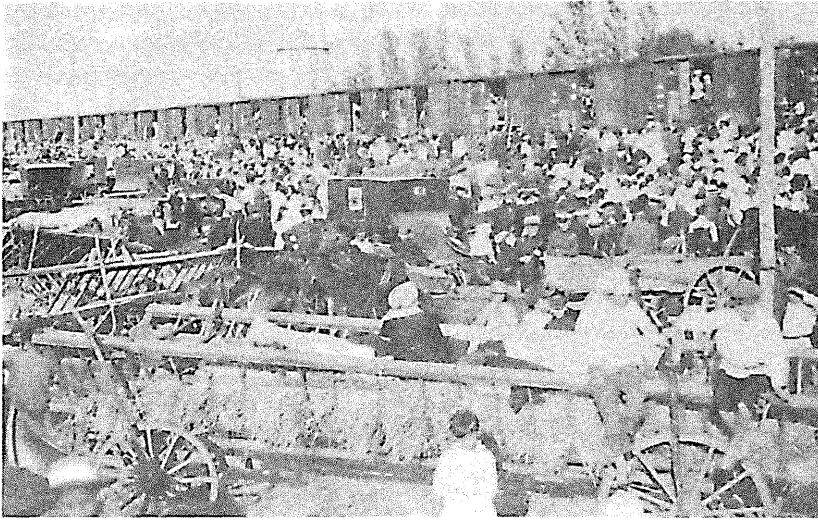
JJ approached a former student of his to be a helper and companion for Tina during his absence. Abram Braun was a young teenager who

lived with his mother and grandparents in Tiegenhagen, his father having been shot when he was young boy. He was known to get into mischief from time to time. His mother quickly agreed to the Thiessen's request, hoping that it would keep Abram out of trouble. He spent a good bit of the summer working for Tina, chopping firewood, hauling water from the artesian well, milking the family cow and doing other odd jobs.<sup>7</sup>

JJ's first task on behalf of the *Verband* was to go to Moscow to obtain exit permits for a first group of 1250 emigrants. These persons, mostly from the Halbstadt area, had already received medical clearance and had been certified by the *Verband* and the local government authorities in Kharkov. In Moscow he made contact with representatives of the Canadian Pacific Railway, other transportation agencies and various government officials. His reception by the director of the passport office was very harsh. When JJ explained that he was there on behalf of the *Verband* and its chairperson B.B. Janz, the official snarled, "So you come from Janz. For three years I have not crossed myself [made the Orthodox sign of the cross] but if I could ever free myself of Janz, I would cross myself three times."<sup>8</sup> Evidently, B.B. Janz's dogged persistence on behalf of the emigration had earned him a reputation. Despite the official's surliness, exit permits were issued the following day.

While in Moscow, JJ also visited the office of the Departure Commissariat to obtain assurance of safe conduct for passengers. The woman in charge was much more accommodating. While working for the Red Cross during the war she had become acquainted with some Mennonite brothers from Halbstadt and they had made a favourable impression on her. JJ knew that one of the brothers had later been killed by bandits during the civil war. He chose not to share this information. The woman promised to provide a letter of protection for the emigrants, and within an hour she produced a copy of a telegram to that effect, directed to all stationmasters along the proposed travel route. Satisfied that all was well, JJ hurried back to Lichtenau in Molotschna to prepare the emigrants for departure. As it turned out, several other emergencies threatened to derail the entire movement. But B.B. Janz, in his determined way, succeeded in having these new obstacles removed in the nick of time.

The first group of emigrants was scheduled to leave the Lichtenau train station on June 23, 1924. People began to arrive at the station early in the morning and spent the day cleaning the 50 freight cars, stowing their luggage and trying to make themselves comfortable for the long journey. Hundreds of friends and relatives gathered to bid their emotional farewell. By evening all was in readiness. JJ described the poignant leave-taking as follows:



*Emigrants bound for Canada board the train at Lichtenau, Molotschna, in 1923. As echelon leader for the Verband, JJ accompanied such emigrating groups of 1924 as far as the Latvian border. Photo: MHCA*

The evening shadows lengthened; the sun was about to set. We loved the soil of our homeland. Now it was time to bid adieu and to leave one's hearth, village, customs, relatives and friends. People took leave of one another. Even the strong wept, some sobbed. Perhaps not all were aware of the significance of this day, but a deep seriousness was written on all faces. Parting is painful. Some of the people were going, the others staying behind. The bell sounded once, then again. Everyone knew that only a few minutes remained. The mass of people became more restless. All those emigrating had to board the train. Here a firm handshake, there the last embrace, tears flow. Yes, parting is painful. The third bell, the train begins to move. "Good-bye. Come after us." "Reunion in eternity," shouted one emigrant. . . . Gradually those remaining behind fade into the distance.<sup>9</sup>

JJ's assignment was to travel on the train with the emigrating group as far as Zebesh on the Latvian border. As promised by the official of the Departure Commissariat, there were no delays. Indeed, some passengers complained to JJ that the train travelled too fast, compromising their safety. They were happy for stops when they could get off the train to cook, eat, wash, visit with friends in other cars and marvel at sights they had never before seen. Along the way, one young child died due to illness and several others were born. During the course of the journey, a train master engaged JJ in conversation, wondering who the emigrants

were and where they were headed. When JJ explained, his stunned reply was, “Three years I have run my head against the wall of bureaucratic red tape in order to get a visa to leave this country, always without success. And here you come with 1250 people, with permission to leave. . . .” It was a reminder to JJ and the other passengers how miraculous their departure actually was.<sup>10</sup>

JJ’s anxiety increased as the train neared the Latvian border. Inwardly he asked himself: Was everything in order? Suppose the officials discovered an illegal passenger who was not on the official list. Suppose the authorities uncovered some new details in the agreements which he had missed. Suppose the customs agents did not honour the arrangements made with Moscow. JJ was keenly aware that his own reputation and that of the *Verband* were on the line. He also knew that if this group failed to cross the border successfully, the departure of future groups would be in great jeopardy.<sup>11</sup>

The group was fortunate. The police inspector who supervised the registration process was friendly and duly impressed when JJ provided 16 “secretaries” to assist with the registration of all 1250 passengers. When JJ informed him that the group included a total of 28 male teachers, nine female teachers and a good number of high school and even post-high school graduates, the inspector reportedly blurted out: “And you are leaving the country. Our land needs people like you desperately.” Some of the customs officials, who inspected the baggage of each family, were not so amenable. They intimidated the emigrants with their questions and with the way they dug into their belongings. In at least one instance, JJ intervened on behalf of a photographer emigrant whose camera was removed by one of the customs agents. When confronted, the agent eventually returned the camera.

Finally the train received permission to pass through the famous “Red Door”—a large red gate which, to the emigrants, represented the door to freedom. There JJ took his leave, his assignment with this group completed. As the train pulled through the gate, he was overcome with emotion and began to weep. An official standing nearby noticed the tears and said, “Well, even the leader weeps!” JJ’s response was, “Comrade, how can I remain without any sign of feeling and emotion when over one hundred of my former students have left this country.” To this, the official replied, “Weep, Comrade.”

After the emigrant train departed, JJ waited for a passenger train from Riga that would take him back to Moscow. While waiting for the train to depart, he noticed that customs agents were having difficulty communicating with three Moscow-bound foreigners, a couple and their companion. Hearing that the woman and the companion could speak some

German, JJ came forward and offered to translate. At the invitation of the couple, he later joined them for dinner in the train. There he learned that the couple was from Canada, that their names were Vincent and Alice Massey, and that Mr. Massey was the new representative for Massey-Harris farm machinery in the Soviet Union. Years later Vincent Massey would become governor-general of Canada.

Over dinner, the Masseys inquired about the long freight train with people aboard that they had observed at Zebesh. JJ informed them of the Mennonites migrating to Canada. The Masseys were familiar with conservative Mennonites in Manitoba and Saskatchewan who were leaving Canada in response to government legislation requiring that their children be sent to public schools. JJ hastened to clarify that the Russian Mennonites bound for Canada would certainly send their children to the public schools. During the course of the conversation Massey encouraged him to come to Canada and to become a teacher among the conservative Mennonites.

As they were speaking, JJ noticed that they were being observed by someone who was undoubtedly secret police. He knew that it was risky for him, as a Russian citizen, to engage in discussions with foreigners; therefore he suggested they end their conversation. The same observer was present when they met again for breakfast; once again the discussion was cut short. JJ took his leave, thinking he would not see the Masseys again. In July, after he had delivered another group to Zebesh and was once again on his way to Moscow, JJ was recognized by the waiter in the train's dining car. Incredulous that he was still free, the waiter informed him that police had planned to arrest him on the previous trip. Thereafter, he was keenly aware that, in carrying out his duties for the *Verband*, he was being closely observed. Later that fall, when Vincent Massey sent him two packages of information about the Canadian school system, he promptly burned them. He did not want to be in possession of any materials that could be construed as a link with foreign agitators.<sup>12</sup>

Over the summer, JJ accompanied three separate echelons to the border—in all a total of 2526 persons. His warm and personable nature, his ability to remember names and faces and his efforts on behalf of the groups gained him the friendship and respect of many of the migrants. Years later, people would recall with gratitude the personal risk that JJ took on their behalf.<sup>13</sup> His successful leadership of the echelons, plus the many friends and acquaintances he gained in the course of his assignment, would open other doors to leadership in the future.

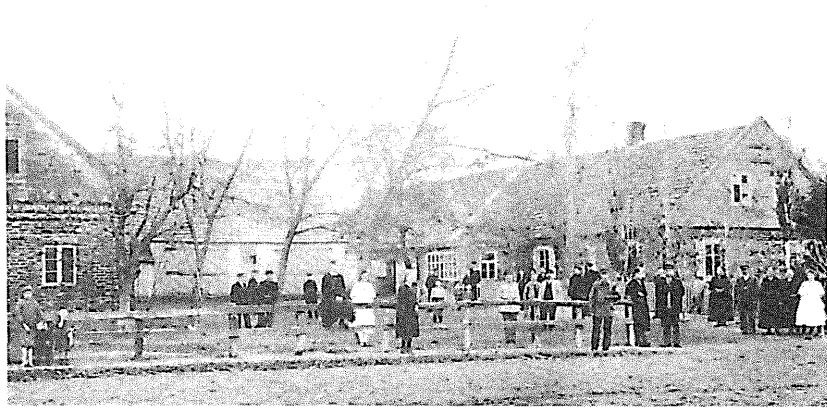
The same summer that JJ worked for the *Verband*, he received an invitation from Mennonite Central Committee to administer its reconstruction program in Siberia.<sup>14</sup> He did not think too long before respond



ing in the negative. His main reason was that he could not see himself in a position of having to handle large sums of money. Bookkeeping and accounting were not among his gifts or abilities. The fact that accepting such an assignment would have meant a move far from loved ones may also have figured into this decision.

Among those departing during the summer of 1924 were a significant number of Tiegenhagen residents—friends, neighbours, students and former students of JJ's. In total about 70 of Tiegenhagen's families left for Canada by 1925, including most of Tina Thiessen's immediate relatives. Her sister Helena Penner, whose husband had been killed in 1919, left with her sons in 1924. Tina's parents and the families of her sister Sarah, who was married to Gerhard Schellenberg, and Maria, who was married to Heinrich Willms, left the following year. Her older brother Heinrich and his family remained in Russia. (Heinrich was arrested during the 1930s and disappeared.)

We do not know whether JJ and Tina were tempted to emigrate at this point along with other folks from Tiegenhagen and with the Kornelsen relatives. Would Tina have preferred to go along with family members? Did JJ believe optimistically that there was still a future in Russia? Could there have been disagreement between them? We can only speculate. One thing is clear: Tiegenhagen no longer felt like home. Almost all departing villagers had sold their farms to non-Mennonites, something which the *Verband* discouraged, but which it evidently allowed in this instance.<sup>15</sup> The village was no longer the same. Consequently, when JJ received an invitation to come to teach in the village of Fischau, a short distance way, he eagerly accepted.



*A Tiegenhagen farm, ca. 1926. Most of the Mennonite residents of Tiegenhagen emigrated in 1924. Photo: MHCA*

Thus in September 1924 JJ and Tina with their two small daughters, Hedio and Katie, moved to Fischau. Men from the village helped them move their household goods, while women welcomed them with coffee and *Rollkuchen* (fritters) sprinkled with sugar. Once again JJ immersed himself in his teaching while Tina cared for the children and the home. General improvement in the economic conditions meant that providing for the family's basic needs became less of a struggle. They were able to purchase a horse and a few cows and could earn extra income by selling cream to a local cooperative.

### **A Decision to Emigrate**

Eventually JJ and Tina decided that it was best that they too leave Russia. All emigrants needed to undergo a medical examination conducted by Canadian health officials; they could not leave Russia without a certificate declaring they were in good health. (Between 1924 and 1926 the examinations were conducted in the colonies.) The earliest date stamped on any of the Thiessen certificates is May 24, 1925.<sup>16</sup> The certificate indicates that JJ and Tina were contemplating emigration and taking some preparatory steps.

Even if the Thiessens had not formally committed themselves to emigrating by mid-1925, a series of alarming events surely pushed them in that direction. Already in summer the *Verband* officials were ordered to move their office from Orloff (in Molotschna) to the city of Kharkov and to refrain from any further work on emigration matters. A short while later they were informed that the *Verband's* activities were to be taken over by the regional government and the Communist Party. This essentially meant the end of the *Verband*. A final delegate meeting in February 1926, which JJ attended and helped to chair, officially approved the dissolution of the organization which had done so much to rebuild the economic foundation of the Mennonite settlements and to facilitate the emigration.

For B.B. Janz, the courageous and tireless chairman of the *Verband*, the dissolution of the organization was a clear signal that there was no longer a future for the Mennonites in Russia. Ever since the summer of 1924, when they had worked together on emigration matters, he and JJ had been good friends. On August 31 that year, JJ's birthday, the two men had found themselves together in a Moscow hotel room, sharing a simple meal of bread, meat and grapes. They had talked at length about the migration, prayed together and parted with an embrace.<sup>17</sup> Since that time, Janz had come under increasing surveillance which culminated in extensive interrogations in March 1926. Knowing that his work was done and that his life was in danger, Janz made a disguised escape in May.<sup>18</sup>



*Delegates to the final meeting of the Verband der Bürger Holländischer Herkunft held on February 1926 in Kharkov, Ukraine. J.J. Thiessen (seated 8th from left in the second row) was one of three chairpersons elected for this historic gathering.*

Only hours after his departure, Soviet secret police came searching for him.

Another important development was the drastic transformation of the educational system, particularly after the mid-1920s. The Soviets implemented many changes: all schools were consolidated into a unified national system under the direction of a People's Commissariat for Education, a new curriculum divided lesson materials into broad themes or "complexes" rather than subjects, classroom learning was supplemented with practical productive activity and schools became known as "labour schools."<sup>19</sup> Some Mennonite teachers found it extremely difficult to adapt to the new expectations regarding teaching methodology and pedagogy, especially when these were not spelled out clearly and when the necessary books and aids were not available. JJ noted that many teachers had difficulty adjusting, and some gave up their profession and left for Canada.

JJ's memoirs include only one sentence regarding the overhaul of the educational system: "Generally speaking, I enjoyed my teaching with the exception of the years of the famine and the Civil War." This comment, however brief, suggests that he did not find the curriculum changes particularly overwhelming. One other piece of evidence corroborating this is a letter of response from the secretary of the Halbstadt-based dairy cooperative of the *Verband* to an inquiry from JJ's third class students at the "Fischauer Arbeitsschule" (Fischau labour school). The students had asked about the cooperative's membership, the kinds of cattle enrolled, the location of separator machines, and whether they could visit the cooperative's creamery.<sup>20</sup> Their interest in the cooperative is possibly a reflection of JJ's willingness to incorporate new ideas about practical learning into his teaching and thus to accommodate to the new educational system.

In the end, however, the key issue for JJ, as for other teachers, was not the new methodology and pedagogy, but the government's prohibition against religious instruction in the schools. By 1922 this ban was being strictly enforced. Within a few years, teachers were required to teach an overtly anti-Christian course of study. In the spring of 1926, for example, JJ's friend Isaak I. Regehr of the Alexanderkrone *Zentralschule* attended a compulsory course on politics and pedagogy. He and the others who enrolled were informed that, if they wished to retain their jobs, they would actively have to advance the communist cause. It was no longer enough simply to refrain from teaching religion; teachers were now required to promote communism and atheism in the classroom. For Regehr, who was reluctant to leave Russia, this was the final push he needed to set his sights on Canada. It seems likely that this was the "last

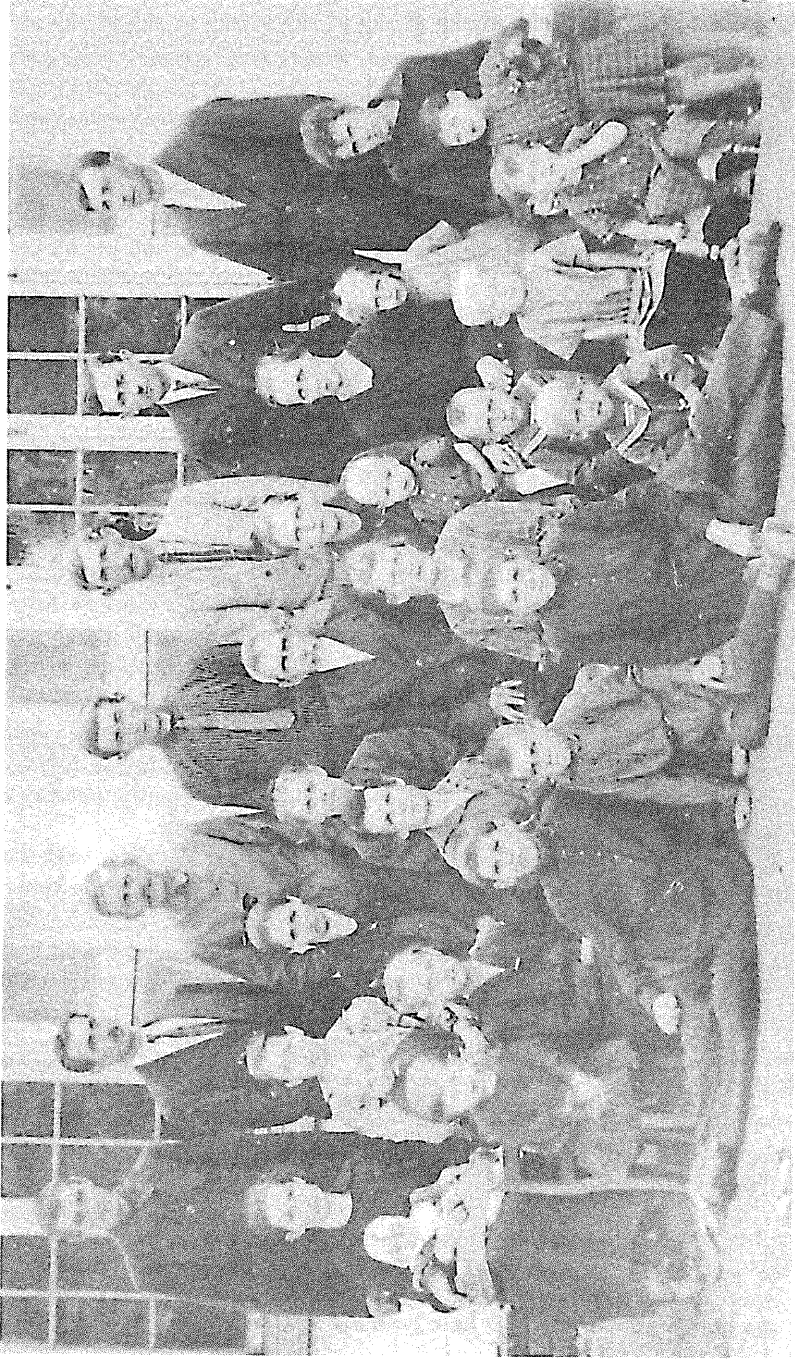
straw” for JJ too. A week prior to his departure, he was queried by a Communist Party member as to his reason for leaving. With uncharacteristic bluntness, he offered the following reply, “Religious instructions has been cut back to such an extent that I no longer feel comfortable in the school.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Farewell**

So JJ and Tina began to prepare for the move. This was no small undertaking. Since the government now required passports for each family, and since there was no longer an organization like the *Verband* to assist with documentation, JJ spent much time and energy acquiring the necessary papers for his family, but also for quite a few others. This was a very long, involved and at times discouraging process, although JJ’s experience as echelon leader and his familiarity with various government offices may have made it easier for him than for others.<sup>22</sup> He and Tina also organized an auction sale to dispose of their animals and furniture. Unlike many emigrants, who had to settle for much less than the value of their things, the Thiessens actually did quite well with their auction. A horse which JJ had recently purchased for 98 rubles now sold for twice that amount. On two occasions after the auction, thieves tried twice to break into the Thiessen home, most likely to steal the earnings; they were unsuccessful. The unexpected income enabled the Thiessens to pay off their travel debt with less difficulty than many emigrants.

Several days before their departure, the family made a short trip to Klippenfeld to say farewell to JJ’s family. A transportation company was willing to make a car and driver available for this purpose. Although Tina could look forward to being reunited with her parents and sisters in Canada, JJ knew that he was unlikely ever to see members of his family again. Just in his early sixties, Johann Thiessen was struggling with asthma, rheumatism and a heart ailment, and grandfather Neufeld was very old and frail. JJ’s youngest brother Abram, only 13 years old, begged to go along with JJ and Tina but his father would not hear of it. None of the other siblings had plans to emigrate. Grandfather Neufeld took JJ and Tina’s leaving especially hard. As their car drove away, he stood on the road watching and waving, tears streaming down his cheeks. That image of his beloved grandfather would forever be seared into JJ’s memory.

On October 28, 1926 the Thiessens, along with nearly 500 other emigrants, boarded the train at Lichtenau . At seven o’clock that evening they departed their beloved Molotschna never to return. JJ was torn with a mixture of emotions. He felt guilty for abandoning his people at a time of great need. Just a few days earlier, an elderly minister had chided him



*The extended Thiessen clan in Klippenfeld gathered for this photograph prior to JJ and Tina's departure for Canada.*

for leaving, saying he was needed in Russia. He felt heart-rending sorrow at being separated from his family and his beloved students. He also grieved the loss of his profession. Despite the encouragement from Vincent Massey, JJ figured that his teaching days were likely over, and it pained him greatly to “hang up on a nail” the vocation that he had grown to love. While the young people on the train were excited by the adventure on which they were embarking, JJ’s feelings were more akin to those of older folks who experienced the anguish of this historic leave-taking.

Two young people travelled with JJ and Tina and their daughters. One was Margaret Dyck, the 20-year-old foster daughter of some friends from Muntau who had departed in 1924. At that time Margaret had been ill and had not passed the medical examination; she was now healthy and able to rejoin her adoptive family. The other person was 15-year-old Abram Braun from Tiegenhagen who had been Tina’s helper during the summer of 1924. When Abram learned that the Thiessens were emigrating to Canada, he appeared on their doorstep in Fischau reminding JJ of a promise that, should the family decide to emigrate, he could accompany them.<sup>23</sup> JJ could not remember making this promise but, after consultation with Abram’s mother, he and Tina agreed to take the young teenager along. Unfortunately, the family’s little dog had to remain behind, which was heartbreaking for Hedio and Katie. Much later, JJ learned that the dog, which had accompanied them to the Lichtenau train station, had refused to leave after the train had departed. He had sat there faithfully for several weeks waiting for the family to return, until finally one day a villager had found his dead body lying next to the tracks.

JJ again acted as leader for the echelon, since he was familiar with the task. The trip to the border went fairly smoothly, except for a few tense moments in Moscow when a Mr. and Mrs. Goertz discovered, just a few hours before their scheduled departure, that they had not received their exit permits. They came to JJ in desperation, terrified they might be left behind. Evidently there was something in Mr. Goertz’s past that gave him reason to be fearful. JJ asked if they had any money. They had very little but were able to borrow a total of 300 rubles, not an insignificant amount. Upon returning with the money, JJ took Mr. Goertz and marched off to the office of the police. In a letter to JJ years later, Mr. Goertz recalled the interaction there as follows:

You walked toward the official with the confidence and determination of one who had experienced success and, with a smile on your face, extended your hand and said, “Comrade!! This citizen . . . and his wife’s passports must inadvertently have been left in their suitcase. Would you

be so kind as to check once more?” Then you walked beside him and, with lightning speed, placed an envelope with money into his jacket pocket. To this day I can see the official’s hand slide over the package while you looked at him in a friendly manner as if to say, “Get the passports.”

However, he responded, “It’s impossible that I could have overlooked those passports.” Nevertheless, he went to check and returned with the comment, “It’s hard to believe that such a thing could happen—are these the two passes?” “Yes, they are,” you said. We both thanked him for the extra effort and you apologized for the inconvenience. “No matter, no matter, I was glad to be of help,” he said. We said goodbye and left with lighter hearts. . . . I don’t know what the GPU official thought of all this. I only know that two very thankful and fortunate people left that office with a silent vow to God to be forever thankful for His Help. Then, under the rainbow of His grace, we proceeded along the street . . . and were on the way to our new home in Canada which became and remains my earthly home.<sup>24</sup>

At the Zebesh border JJ once again encountered the customs officials that he got to know in 1924. When they learned that JJ now intended to emigrate, their demeanour became “cold as ice,” but they allowed him and the group to proceed. At Riga, JJ left his family together with Margaret Dyck and Abram Braun and travelled to Karlsruhe, Germany, to meet with B.H. Unruh to update him on emigration concerns. Ever since his work for the *Studienkommission* in 1920–1921, Unruh had been assisting with emigration matters from Karlsruhe. Early in 1926 he had been appointed the official European representative of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. JJ spent several days in intense discussion with the former *Kommerzschnule* teacher. Together they also attended a concert given by a German male choir. After the concert a raffle took place and, much to his astonishment, JJ won a bottle of eau de cologne. He presented this as a gift to Tina when they were reunited in Southampton, England, several days later.

The week they had been separated had been difficult for Tina and the children. The CPR barracks in Riga had been cold, the food was poor and there was a shortage of beds. Most distressing for the girls, as for all emigrant children, had been the delousing procedure which caused their scalps to itch and bleed. Then the journey by ship from Riga to England had been very rough with much seasickness. Once again pregnant and still not in the best of health, Tina found all these bewildering experiences quite trying. She was thankful to have Margaret Dyck and Abram Braun along for help and companionship. The family was reunited with JJ in Southampton on November 19.



The huge 16,400 tonne CPR-owned ship, the *Montroyal*, with the Thiessen family on board, departed Liverpool for Canada on November 20, 1926. The ocean crossing was turbulent. A severe storm caused enormous waves to rock the boat and crash over its decks. Most of the family did not emerge from their cabin for four days. Only Abram, together with some other young fellows, seemed to enjoy the adventure. The ship finally docked at Saint John, New Brunswick, on November 28, an entire month since the Mennonites on board had left their homes in southern Russia. The long journey was not yet complete, but the end was in sight.

JJ was 33 when he, Tina and their young daughters set foot on Canadian soil. On the one hand, they were grateful finally to be near the end of their exhausting trek. At the same time, they faced much uncertainty and insecurity. Where would they make a new home? How would they support themselves financially? How would they function, not knowing the language or the customs? As their train wound its way through the forests of New Brunswick en route to Ontario, JJ contemplated the dreary surroundings and wondered whether they had made the right decision. In the old country, he had held out longer than most teachers, hoping optimistically for better times. Finally, he had become convinced that those better times would not be forthcoming and the decision had been made to emigrate. Not usually one to struggle with doubt and indecision, JJ now had second thoughts. He was not the only one to harbour grave misgivings. Nearby, a weeping fellow traveller sighed, "Oh, that I had remained in Russia!" Yet, whatever thoughts tumbled through JJ's mind as the train lumbered along the tracks, carrying him further and further from the Russian homeland, there was no turning back.

1926–1930

**“All beginnings are hard”**

The Thiessen family, together with Margaret Dyck and Abram Braun, ended their month-long journey in Waterloo, Ontario. There they were greeted warmly and welcomed into the home of their friends B.B. and Helena Wiens. B. B. Wiens had been the teacher at the Halbstadt Model School during the time that JJ studied in Halbstadt. The Wienses had emigrated in 1924 on the first echelon which JJ had led. Since their arrival in Ontario, Mr. Wiens had developed close links with the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization office in Rosthern and had become the Ontario representative for the Russian immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

The Thiessens soon met other friends from Russia, while also making many new acquaintances within the emerging immigrant community. For JJ, it was a special joy to be reunited with his dear friend from the *Forsteidienst*, Jacob H. Janzen. He had arrived in Canada in 1924 and had been elected as *Ältester* of the *kirchliche* immigrants in Ontario in 1925. As a *Reiseprediger* (itinerant preacher), he ministered to immigrant groups from Vineland to Reesor and from Essex County to Hespeler. On their first Sunday in Canada, the Thiessens worshipped with the Waterloo local and were comforted by the familiarity of the worship service amidst all else that was strange and new.

A Mennonite presence in Ontario dates back to 1786 when groups of Mennonites of Swiss-German origin began moving from Pennsylvania into what was then Upper Canada. The first groups settled in the Niagara peninsula, but later immigrants made their homes along the north shore of Lake Erie, York County (north of present-day Toronto), and, most importantly, in Waterloo County. By the 1920s, the largest of the Swiss Mennonite groups was known as the Old Mennonites, while smaller groups were identified as Old Order Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren in Christ. The first Russian Mennonite immigrants to settle in Ontario arrived in 1924, all immigrants from the previous year having gone directly to the west. Of the 5048 immigrants of 1924, 1340 remained in Ontario and were received into the homes of the Swiss Mennonites.<sup>2</sup> In succeeding years, more Russian immigrants made Ontario their final destination.

Among the immigrants already settled in Ontario were Tina Thiesen's relatives. Initially, Tina's sister Helena and her sons, as well as her parents, Jacob and Helena Kornelsen, had gone to Winkler, Manitoba, where they were hosted by Mr. Kornelsen's sister, Sarah (who was also an older half-sister to JJ's father, Johann Thiessen). As a newly married couple, Sarah and her husband, Heinrich Voth, had migrated to the United States in 1876. They had lived in Minnesota, Winkler and Vanderhoof, British Columbia, where Heinrich had given leadership to Mennonite Brethren mission efforts. After her husband's death in Vanderhoof in 1918, Sarah and some of her children had returned to Winkler.<sup>3</sup> There she welcomed her brother whom she had not seen for nearly 50 years. Unfortunately, Mr. Kornelsen became ill with lung cancer soon after the family's arrival in Canada in 1925 and died in spring 1926 before Tina and JJ could see him again. Soon thereafter Mrs. Kornelsen, together with Helena Kornelsen Penner and her four sons, moved to Leamington, Ontario, where they joined the other Kornelsen sisters, Sarah Kornelsen Schellenberg and Maria Kornelsen Willms.

### **A Trip to the West**

Within a week of JJ and Tina's arrival in Ontario, JJ was asked to travel to Rosthern, Saskatchewan, to attend a meeting of immigrant representatives. He was delighted at this opportunity to see more of the country and to meet Bishop David Toews of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. J. H. Janzen had connections at the CPR office in Waterloo and arranged for a free pass for JJ to make a round-trip to Rosthern.

JJ had many significant experiences on this trip. He was fascinated by the miles and miles of snow-decked forest of northern Ontario and the wide plains that opened before him in Manitoba. The prairies reminded him of the beloved steppes of southern Russia and his heart rejoiced. He travelled to Saskatoon and there, with the assistance of another German-speaker, transferred to a train bound for Rosthern. Unfortunately, he fell asleep and missed the Rosthern stop which meant going on to Duck Lake. When he disembarked there, it was late, bitterly cold and the streets were deserted. He was at a loss: he was not adequately clothed for the bone-chilling cold, knew no one and could speak only a few words of English. What to do? Eventually he was approached by a Ukrainian fellow and, since JJ knew Ukrainian, he could explain his predicament. The man agreed to drive JJ to Rosthern in his old Ford for \$5.00. All seemed well until the driver began to express his sympathies for the communist system now in place in Ukraine. Suddenly, JJ was filled with terror as he contemplated the possibility that this man was a Soviet spy.

He positioned himself in such a way that he could observe the driver closely and could seize him, if need be. The fear and dread that he had come to know in Russia was still very much a part of him. Fortunately, his suspicions proved unfounded; the Ukrainian friend delivered him safely to Rosthern and then went on his way.<sup>4</sup>

At Rosthern, JJ found his way to the home of Daniel P. and Katharina Enns who welcomed him warmly despite the late hour. The Ennses had emigrated from Russia in 1924. Daniel was a teacher by training and had served at a variety of schools for 18 years prior to the family’s emigration. He was currently working as secretary-treasurer of the Board of Colonization. Late on a frigid winter’s night in a small town a world away from their native home, these two men sat and talked at length about the old country and the new.

While in Rosthern, JJ hoped for an opportunity to meet David Toews, chairperson of the Board of Colonization, for he had heard much about this amazing man. Toews did have a fascinating story. He was born in 1870, in the Trakt settlement in the Russian province of Samara, just a year after his parents had migrated from Prussia. In 1880, when David was ten, the Toews family joined others in following chiliastic leader Clasz Epp, Jr., to Central Asia where Epp predicted they would meet Jesus. Four years later, disillusioned with Epp’s growing fanaticism, the Toews family migrated to the United States and settled in Kansas. There young David fast-tracked through school, after having had no formal instruction for four years. In 1893 H.H. Ewert, principal of Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, invited him to come to Manitoba to teach at the Gretna public school where he taught for a number of years. Then he completed studies at the Normal School (teachers’ college) in Winnipeg and took another teaching post near Winkler. In 1898 he moved to the frontier region of what would become Saskatchewan and settled in Rosthern. In 1900 he married Margareta Friesen, a 19-year-old Prussian immigrant; they eventually had eight daughters and one son. In Rosthern Toews quickly became a leader in the recently formed Rosenorter Mennonite Church. By the time JJ Thiessen got to know him, Toews was widely known as *Altester* of the Rosenorter Church, chairperson of the Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada and chairperson of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization.

At it turned out, JJ did meet Toews briefly at the immigrants’ gathering and at a worship service on Sunday morning. But the hoped-for meeting scheduled for Monday morning did not take place. In the middle of the night, residents of Rosthern, including JJ and his hosts, the Ennses, were awakened by the sound of the town bell signalling a fire. The Toews’ home was engulfed in flames. JJ and Daniel Enns ran to the

scene to try to be of help. By that time, the Toews family had made a rather miraculous escape and fled to the neighbours. Members of the family all sustained frostbite because of the frigid temperatures that night. Bishop Toews and daughter Alma suffered burns on their hands and feet. Four-year-old Irene, the youngest, was burned quite seriously.<sup>5</sup>

JJ visited Bishop Toews later that Monday at the hotel where the family was receiving nursing care. Toews encouraged JJ to stay in Rosthern for a few days, since he felt he would be mobile quite soon. Feeling somewhat of an intruder, JJ decided otherwise and the following day boarded the train for the return trip. He learned later that little Irene had died shortly thereafter. For JJ, the tragic circumstances of his first meeting with David Toews were seared into his memory. He had heard much about this man who, despite strong opposition, had worked tirelessly and courageously to rescue desperate Mennonites like himself from the Soviet regime. Even before meeting him face to face, JJ had felt a great debt of gratitude to Toews. He also recognized that they held much in common: a teaching background, a concern for the needy and a love for the Mennonite people. For JJ, it seemed that the tragic experience of the fire now created a special bond between himself and Toews—they had both suffered the loss of a child.<sup>6</sup>

En route back to Ontario, JJ made a stop in Manitoba to visit friends and relatives. Several of JJ and Tina's Tiegenhagen neighbours had purchased a large farm together in the La Salle area, and JJ wished to see them in their Canadian home. It was a warm reunion, in more ways than one. Not only did the old friends recall with JJ times of joy and sorrow that they had shared in Tiegenhagen; they also insisted on outfitting him more adequately for the Canadian winter and purchased his first set of woven long underwear for which he was indeed grateful. From La Salle, he took the train to Winkler where he visited the Voth relatives, as well as the grave of his father-in-law Jacob Kornelsen. He then returned to Winnipeg and to Waterloo. In his absence, Tina and the girls had gone to Leamington and had a joyous reunion with Tina's mother and sisters.

The trip to Saskatchewan had impressed JJ with the challenges facing the new immigrants. It was clear that in Canada it would no longer be possible for Mennonites to recreate the self-contained and closed communities that immigrants of the 1870s and 1890s had established. A.A. Friesen, member of the *Studienkommission* who had recommended Canada as a new home, had made it very clear that there would be no Mennonite "commonwealth" in Canada. In some instances groups of immigrant families could purchase large farms on special "Mennonite terms" and operate them communally, thereby building miniature villages. This is what the Tiegenhagen folks had done in La Salle. Also,

there were the so-called “wilderness lands” which were still available for homesteading and which allowed for fairly compact and closed settlements. But for the most part, Mennonite immigrants needed to adjust to settling amongst and working alongside Canadians of various ethnic origins. And they needed to do so over a wide and scattered geography stretching from Ontario to British Columbia.

There was also the issue of language and, closely related to that, schools. The immigrants were determined to retain their use of German language in the home and in the church. *Deutsch und Religion* (German and religion) were the twin pillars of their self-understanding as a people. But they knew that in the public schools and in their interactions with the *Engländer* (meaning, literally, English person, but used to designate anyone who was not Mennonite), they would need to learn the English language. For young children, who quickly began attending Canadian schools, learning English happened naturally and rather easily. For older adults, particularly women who had fewer opportunities to interact with the *Engländer*, learning the new language was a huge challenge.

Then there was the whole issue of making a living. The immigrants needed to work, not only to provide for the sustenance of their families but also to pay the *Reiseschuld* (travel debt) owed the CPR, since many had come to Canada on credit. One of the stipulations of the CPR contract with the Board of Colonization had been that the Mennonites would settle on farms. Since the majority of immigrants had been farmers in Russia, this was not a burdensome expectation, as long as land was available. But what of those who had not been farmers, for example, teachers? What were they to do? Some of them chose to enroll in the two Mennonite teacher-training schools, the German-English Academy in Rosthern and the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, thereby learning English and gaining certification as teachers in Canada. Others, particularly older teachers, felt they had no option but to resort to farming to support their families. Within his first year in Canada JJ’s friend, B.B. Janz, received a letter from the Department of Immigration inquiring why he had not yet settled on a farm.<sup>7</sup> He eventually purchased a farm in Coaldale, Alberta. Many young people were encouraged by their parents to find employment so their earnings could help to pay off the *Reiseschuld*. Young women usually found work as domestic servants for wealthy city folk, while young men worked in mines, in the bush or on railway construction crews.

### **A New Job**

Finding a job was a most urgent priority for JJ and, as soon as the Christmas celebrations were over, he began his search. His first attempt

was discouraging. Accompanied by the daughter of friends who already knew English quite well, he visited some 25 different establishments, none of which was hiring any workers. Over the next weeks he knocked on many other doors, again without success. All this was rather humbling for JJ. In Russia he had enjoyed considerable stature as a well-respected school teacher and emerging leader. As a new immigrant without facility in the language and without an employable skill, he had little to offer—except a willingness to work hard. Yet in a letter to teacher friends back in Russia, JJ remained optimistic. If there was no work to be found in a factory or an office, he could always move west and work on a farm in the spring. His failure to secure employment thus far had not caused him to regret the decision to emigrate. For the time being, he would wait on God's leading.<sup>8</sup>

Just a short time later, JJ happened quite by chance to meet Mr. Knechtel, manager at the Kauffman rubber factory, a leading employer in Kitchener-Waterloo. Mr. Knechtel offered him a job which, to JJ, was an answer to prayer. Working the night shift, his task was to lower a large tire mould into a vat of boiling water, then remove the mould and the tire within it. An experienced Ukrainian co-worker taught him the strenuous and dangerous procedure. At 50 cents an hour, the pay was better than average and JJ felt elated at his good fortune. After only a few weeks on the job, however, he seriously injured his finger and was put out of commission for a time.

While he was waiting to return to Kauffmans, JJ received a letter from David Toews asking him to come to Rosthern to accept the job of assistant *Reiseschuld* collector for the Board of Colonization. The Board was under increasing pressure from the CPR to pay the dues of passengers who had arrived on credit. By the end of 1926, more than 17,000 Russian Mennonite immigrants had entered Canada under the auspices of the Board-CPR arrangement, more than 11,000 of these being credit passengers. Despite the conscientious efforts of full-time collector H.B. Janz and the donations of Mennonites in the United States, the amount owed the CPR kept on climbing. By early 1927 nearly half the \$750,000 principal for the 1923 and 1924 accounts was still owing and a great deal more for 1925 and 1926.<sup>9</sup> It was clear that more energy would need to go into the collection process. At a meeting on February 9, 1927, the Board executive decided to offer JJT the position of assistant collector with a salary of \$75 a month, also paying the expenses of moving the family and its possessions to Rosthern.<sup>10</sup> The motion to this effect was made by Alvah Bowman, Old Mennonite representative on the Board, and seconded by Daniel P. Enns, JJ's host while on his December visit to Rosthern. How the Board came to choose JJ for this position is unclear.



*David Toews (at left) with Harold S. Bender and C.F. Klassen who were deeply involved in helping immigrants come to Canada. Later, J.J. Thiessen joined Toews on the Board of Colonization.*

Photo: MHCA

David Toews, Board chairperson had spent only a few fleeting moments with JJ the morning after the disastrous fire, certainly not enough time to develop a sense of JJ's abilities. In all likelihood, the invitation was made on the basis of the recommendations of others who knew JJ from his leadership of the 1924 echelons.

JJ was quite astonished by the invitation and went to his friend Jacob H. Janzen for advice. Janzen believed that JJ was called to serve the Mennonite people rather than to make tires, and he counselled him to go to Rosthern. Others friends concurred that the invitation was from God and that JJ should heed it. Obviously, he was excited by the possibility of working alongside David Toews and others in the immigration work. The one thing that he regretted was having to submit his resignation to Mr. Knechtel at the rubber factory. Knechtel had been a saviour to him in time of need, and he did not wish to appear ungrateful. But when a telegram from David Toews followed the letter, urging "Come," JJ responded in the affirmative.<sup>11</sup>

Where did Tina figure in this decision to move across the country? From her perspective, there would certainly have been reason to hesitate. She was in her eighth month of pregnancy and a sudden relocation must have seemed a daunting undertaking at that time. A move to Rosthern would also mean a much greater distance separating her from her mother



and sisters in Leamington. Moreover, just when she was becoming accustomed to Waterloo, she would again be faced with a new place, new people and new circumstances. At the same time, Tina had already demonstrated tremendous resilience and inner strength, and may have been quite open to the challenge of the move. Given the clear delineation of roles in their marriage and the authority assumed by JJ as husband, her personal wishes may not have entered the picture at all.

### **The Rosthern Context**

The town of Rosthern, Saskatchewan, was nestled in the triangular valley between the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers before they merged and flowed on to Lake Manitoba and Hudson Bay. The valley was part of the huge Great Plains region stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. But, unlike the southern part of the province of Saskatchewan, which was somewhat desert-like, the valley was considered part of the northern parkland, possessing not only rolling grasslands but also bluffs of poplar and willow and many sloughs.

Traditionally, the valley had been the home of the Gros Ventres, Assiniboine and Cree nations who had followed the plentiful buffalo herds, the mainstay of their societies, across the open prairies. In the 16th and 17th centuries, fur trade posts were established along the rivers, bringing European fur traders into the heart of the continent. In the late 1800s Metis people, descendants of traders and Aboriginal women, laid claim to the region. Two events, however, ensured that European agricultural settlers would have supremacy in the 20th century: the crushing of the Metis Rebellion of 1885 and the coming of the railway in 1890.

In 1890 a railway line running north-south linked the towns of Regina, Saskatoon and Prince Albert. The next year a group of 11 Mennonite families from Manitoba filed for homesteads along the railway line in the area that would become the Rosthern district. The two Manitoba "reserves" set aside for Mennonite immigrants in 1870s were now filled, and families in need of land were starting to move further west. Between the early 1890s and 1914, there was a fairly steady movement of Mennonites from both Manitoba and Russia to what in 1905 would become the province of Saskatchewan.<sup>12</sup> In response to Mennonite petitions, the federal government set aside the Hague-Osler Reserve in 1895 specifically for Mennonite settlers.<sup>13</sup> In addition to Mennonites, there were also groups of Ukrainian and German Lutheran settlers in the Rosthern district.

The Mennonites in and around Rosthern were organized into three main *Gemeinden* or congregations. The term "congregation" referred to the cluster of groups worshipping independently but nevertheless united

by one elected *Ältester* and one membership list. Two of these congregations were the Old Colony and Bergthal churches. Their members came primarily from the groups that had migrated to Manitoba in the 1870s in response to the erosion of Mennonite privileges in Russia. Initially, these congregations were served by the Manitoba *Ältesten*, but by the early 1900s they had organized independently. The Saskatchewan Bergthaler are not to be confused with the Manitoba Bergthaler. (The Saskatchewan group was more closely related to a Manitoba group called the Sommerfelder. Both the Old Colony and the Bergthaler churches were committed to the preservation of certain traditional aspects of Mennonite faith and life: private German-language schools, closed village living and an agriculturally-based livelihood.)

Besides the Old Colony and Bergthal congregations, there was also the Rosenorter Mennonite Church which was organized in 1894 in Eigenheim (some 10 kilometres west of Rosthern) by those families who had arrived directly from Prussia. The first *Ältester* was Prussian-born Peter Regier who served until 1922 when he was succeeded by David Toews. Like the Bergthal and Old Colony congregations, the Rosenorter church had a number of “locals,” each with its own buildings and ministers. The Rosthern local was established in 1897 with other locals at Eigenheim, Aberdeen, Laird, Tiefengrund and Hague. At first, the membership of the Rosenorter Church consisted primarily of recent immigrants from Prussia and Russia. Over time it also attracted individuals who had left the Old Colony or Bergthal churches, as well as Oklahoma Mennonites who moved to Saskatchewan in the wake of World War I. Most *kirchliche* immigrants of the 1920s who settled in the Rosthern area also made the Rosenorter Church their spiritual home.

With the influx of settlers, the village of Rosthern grew quickly as a farm service centre.<sup>14</sup> By 1900 it boasted 75 buildings and a population of 300 residents. The construction of several additional railway lines brought more settlers to the surrounding area. This increased the demands for more services such as merchants, cafes, hotels, banks, lumber yards, livery stables, implement dealers and grain elevators. A first edition of a local newspaper came off the press in 1902 and telephone service began in 1906. By 1905, the town also had nine or ten different churches within its environs—Mennonite, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Swedenborgian—reflecting the increasing diversity of the community.

Beginning in 1923, many Russian Mennonite immigrants made their way to Rosthern. In fact, between 1923 and 1930, about half of the 20,000 immigrants came to Saskatchewan and most of them first got off the train at Rosthern.<sup>15</sup> Many families were billeted in area homes until

they were able to purchase their own farms or move elsewhere. The Rosthern community felt the influx of foreigners keenly. The public school, under special pressure to accommodate all the children, resorted to holding extra classes in nearby churches. Even so, in late 1926 an immigrants' meeting heard that some 20 children who should have been in school were not attending, simply because there was no room for them.<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, there were tensions as the newcomers interacted with the Mennonites who had arrived earlier. One of the episodes which exacerbated the difficulties between the newcomers and their hosts, as well as the wider community, was a series of court cases which came to be known as the Friesen-Braun trials.<sup>17</sup> The trials pitted Isaac Braun, a 1924 immigrant from Halbstadt, Molotschna, against Henry P. Friesen, a Rosthern area farmer and entrepreneur. Initially, Friesen tried to sell Braun some land, but the transaction was not finalized before Braun moved to British Columbia. Soon thereafter Braun sued Friesen for \$5000, an amount which he (Braun) claimed to have lent Friesen, but which Friesen vehemently denied having borrowed. On the first round, the judge ruled in favour of Braun, but that judgement was overturned when it was revealed that Braun had resorted to perjury to provide evidence for his case. This was followed by a series of additional trials as new charges and counter-charges were laid. In 1928 Braun was finally convicted of fabricating evidence and sentenced to five years in prison to be followed with deportation. He served his prison sentence in the Prince Albert penitentiary and was deported to the Soviet Union in 1933. Friesen was cleared of any wrong-doing in 1929.

The whole affair caused considerable rancour in the Rosthern community and throughout the province since it was widely reported in the media. It was especially embarrassing for David Toews and other officials of the Board of Colonization who had been sympathetic to Braun. It did not help matters that Henry P. Friesen was a brother to I. P. Friesen, a minister in the Rosenorter Church and someone with whom Toews had some longstanding differences. For a time the mistrust and suspicion were so great that there was speculation that the Toews' house fire in December 1926 had been deliberately set by the Friesen faction. Eventually, Toews and other supporters of Braun had to admit that they had been grievously deceived. A public reconciliation between Toews and the Friesen family took place in 1931 at a meeting of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church. Even so, it would be many years before the hurts caused by the Friesen-Braun trials would be healed.

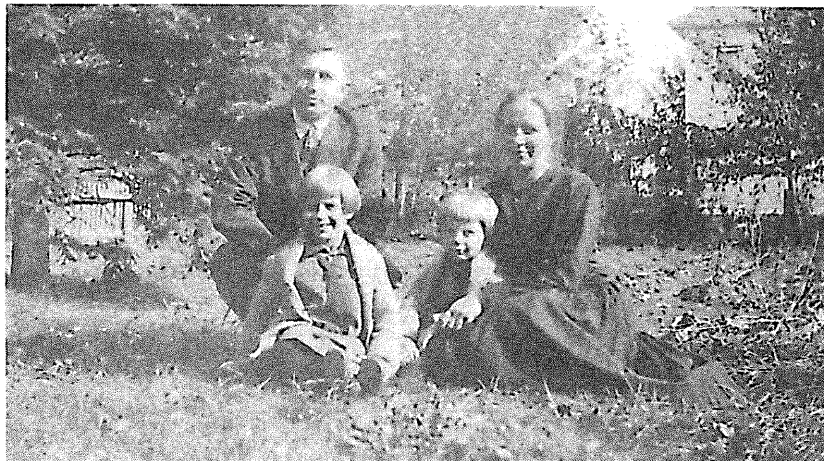
JJ Thiessen's arrival in Rosthern coincided with the high drama of the Friesen-Braun controversy. Only six weeks into his new job at the Board of Colonization office, the Board received several peculiar pieces of

paper which seemed to exonerate Braun and implicate Friesen. (Some time later it was determined that these pages had been fabricated by Isaac Braun.) No doubt JJ took an interest in the trials. But thus far no evidence has come to light that he strongly aligned himself with either Braun or Friesen. He likely knew Braun from Halbstadt and, as a fellow immigrant, may have sympathized with him, as many other immigrants did. He may also have been influenced by David Toews’ perspective. Nevertheless, if he held a particular view on the trials, he likely kept it to himself or his closest associates. For one thing, he knew how important it was for the immigrants to make a good impression on their host society, and he did not wish to jeopardize that. Secondly, he arrived in Rosthern when the trials had already been underway for more than two years. Thus he could not presume to know all that had transpired. Thirdly, JJ’s general inclination on controversial issues was to take a position of moderation. In 1933, he was named to a special commission of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church to deal with new tensions between David Toews and the Friesens, prompted by a letter from Isaac Braun in the Soviet Union. It is doubtful that JJ would have been elected to this position if he had taken a strongly partisan position earlier.<sup>18</sup> But this is getting ahead of the story.

### **Settling in Rosthern**

The Thiessen family arrived in Rosthern on March 4, 1927 in the middle of a snowstorm. Margaret Dyck had rejoined her foster family in Whitewater, Manitoba; Abram Braun stayed behind in Ontario for several months. Initially the Thiessens stayed with Daniel and Katharina Enns, but they soon found a small two-story house to rent and moved in with their few belongings. They had not brought many things with them from Russia: a desk, a small bench, some linens, a few treasured dishes, some books and the precious wall clock given as a wedding gift by the Tiegengagen students. The clock had survived the journey from Fischau until the very last leg—the train ride from Saskatoon to Rosthern—when the glass face had been smashed. Fortunately, the clock was not beyond repair and soon its familiar and regular chime once again marked the passing of the hours in the Thiessen household. In her resourceful way, Tina managed to make their new home a place of warmth and comfort, and some time later the Thiessens purchased the tiny frame structure.

The Thiessen family continued to grow. On April 26, 1927, seven weeks after arriving in Rosthern, Tina gave birth to a third daughter. Little Helene Margaret, named after her maternal and paternal grandmothers, was born at home. Less than two years later, on December 24, 1928, Walter Arnold was born in a new hospital just established by the



*JJ, Tina, Hedie and Katie in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. Helen and Walter joined the family during the three years in Rosthern*

Order of Grey Nuns.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the births of his three sisters were uncomplicated, Walter had a difficult beginning and nearly died. According to the story handed down within the family, the nurses attending Walter's birth were anxious to participate in the Christmas Eve midnight mass at the Catholic church.<sup>20</sup> In their hurry, they had not taken care to sterilize the instruments properly. Consequently, Walter became gravely ill with blood poisoning. The recommended treatment for blood poisoning, as well as a whole host of ailments, was "bleeding"—a procedure that involved cutting the flesh and then drawing blood out with suction cups. Baby Walter received this painful treatment a total of 12 times. Today it is recognized that this procedure has no therapeutic value, but Walter survived and in due time grew to be a healthy and happy boy.

While Tina was consumed with home and family, JJ quickly immersed himself in his job at the Board of Colonization office. There he joined a team of conscientious and committed workers, all of whom, aside from Ältester Toews, were recent immigrants like himself. Daniel P. Enns was the secretary treasurer; initially A.A. Friesen had held this position but he had resigned in 1925 after a conflict with Toews. Additionally, H.J. Willms was the registrar, H.B. Janz the head collector and Katie Hooge the secretary.

JJ's first weeks were spent in the office trying to learn the collection system. He also accompanied H.B. Janz on excursions within Saskatchewan, visiting immigrants and encouraging them to pay their debts as best they could. His first independent assignment as assistant collector was to make a trip to visit immigrants who had settled in the Peace River district

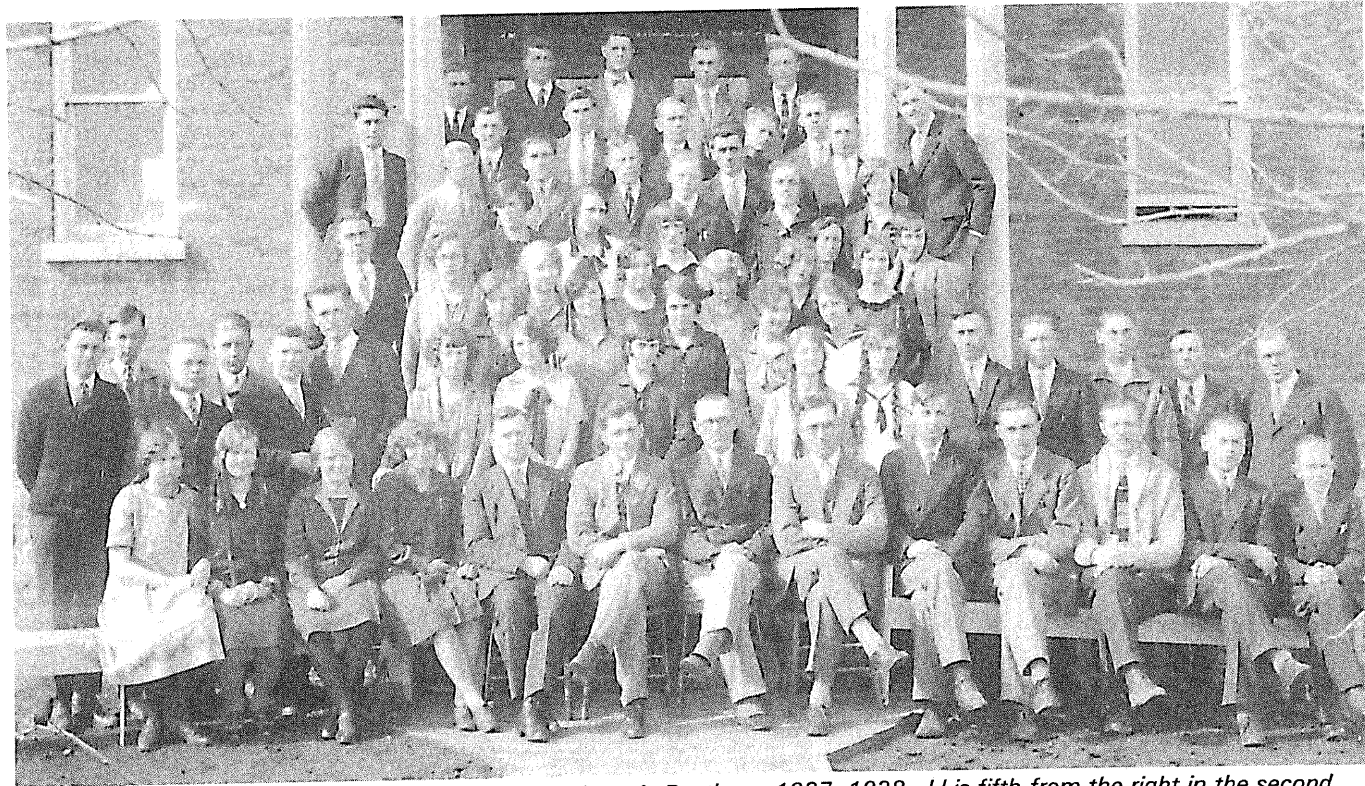
of Alberta. He was happy for the chance to see the mountains and a new part of Canada, and was delighted to discover acquaintances in the Peace River community. But he returned to Rosthern virtually empty-handed and felt somewhat discouraged that he had so little to show for his efforts.

The trip convinced JJ that he would need to expend more energy learning the English language. At one level, he simply wanted to be able to communicate better with the *Engländer*. During numerous encounters en route to Peace River he was unable to make himself understood, and he was most frustrated by these experiences. At another level, he was concerned about the future of the immigrant community in Canada. As he watched the prairie landscape from his train window, he reflected on the fact that his six-year-old daughter Hedio, already in school, was learning English much more quickly. He realized that within a few years a great gulf could divide the generations in the immigrant community if older persons like himself did not make an attempt to learn the new language and new ways that their children and grandchildren were absorbing so easily and naturally. It was a sobering thought to contemplate. For the first time since their arrival in Canada, JJ dared to think about enrolling in high school so he could learn the new ways.<sup>21</sup>

### Study and Work

That very September he enrolled as a full-time student at the German-English Academy in Rosthern. The school had been founded in 1905 by Mennonites in the Rosthern area for the dual purposes of providing a government-approved high school education and training public school teachers for districts dominated by Mennonites.<sup>22</sup> David Toews had been one of the key founders and had also served as teacher, principal and secretary-treasurer for a number of years. From 1925 to 1944, he served as chairperson of the board. Partly because of the encouragement of Toews and also because of their own interest in higher education, many newcomers enrolled in the Academy after their arrival in Canada. Already in the fall of 1923, six young immigrants were studying at the Academy, and during the 1925–1926 school year, nearly half of the total number of students enrolled—23 of 49—were recent immigrants.<sup>23</sup> A number of these, like JJ, were mature students who had been qualified teachers in Russia.

JJ's decision to enroll at the Academy is a clear sign that, besides wanting to learn English, he also hoped eventually to return to teaching. By the summer of 1927, it had become clear that the Board of Colonization could not continue to employ him much longer. Thus, he needed to plan for longer-term financial security. In a letter to a teacher friend in



*The teachers and students of the German-English Academy in Rosthern, 1927-1928. JJ is fifth from the right in the second row. Teachers in the front row are (from left): F.C. Thiessen, C.D. Penner (principal), J.B. Neufeld and I.I. Friesen.*

Halbstadt, written in September 1929, he indicated that he had returned to school to prepare—once again—for the teaching profession.<sup>24</sup>

Within a month of starting school, his position with the Board of Colonization ended. Increasing restrictions in Russia meant that the number of Mennonite emigrants leaving the country dropped drastically: only 847 left in 1927 and 511 in 1928.<sup>25</sup> The Board’s workload thus declined, while continuing financial pressures forced it to lay off some of its staff. It was also becoming clear that the most effective and efficient means of collecting the *Reiseschuld* was through local contact people. On October 6, 1927 the executive of the Board met and discussed “the necessity of reducing office expenses in view of the small movement of this year.” The meeting heard that “Mr. J.J. Thiessen had quit his work” and that several other individuals had also terminated their employment, thereby reducing the Board’s payroll by \$265 per month.<sup>26</sup>

It is unclear whether JJ had actually quit of his own volition, or whether he had simply been informed that the Board could no longer pay him. In any case, the loss of income was a blow to JJ and Tina. They had counted on managing financially with the Board salary and the income earned by providing room and board to three young fellows. Fortunately, within a fairly short amount of time JJ found new work with the *Zentral Mennonitisches Immigranten Komitee* (Central Mennonite Immigrant Committee) or ZMIK. ZMIK had been formed by the immigrants in 1923 to build unity amongst immigrant groups, to represent their interests and to promote their welfare.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it concerned itself with educational and cultural work, medical and social welfare assistance, naturalization and citizenship matters, and numerous other tasks and concerns. Based in Rosthern, it was chaired by Dietrich H. Epp, a former teacher from the Chortitza colony and editor of a new immigrant newspaper entitled *Der mennonitische Immigrantenbote* (Mennonite Immigrant Messenger), later known as *Der Bote*.

Initially ZMIK tried to carry out its objectives simply through the energies of volunteers. But at least one person, H.B. Janz of the Board of Colonization and a person with great visions for what ZMIK could accomplish, encouraged the ZMIK executive to hire a “technical worker” who could give focussed time and energy to some of ZMIK’s goals and objectives. Having worked with JJ, Janz may even have suggested him as the right person for the job. In any case, by October 1927 JJ was serving as ZMIK’s “technical worker.” According to the record books of ZMIK, he received pay ranging from \$30 to \$50 per month, perhaps depending on the number of hours worked.<sup>28</sup> This represented a significant reduction from the salary he had received at the Board of Colonization. In the spring of 1928 JJ was also elected ZMIK secretary requiring



him to write minutes for meetings, do official correspondence and manage the finances. Although the previous secretary had received a \$25-per-month honorarium for his services, JJ's salary remained unchanged when he took on the additional responsibilities.

So JJ went to school by day and performed his job by night. The records of the ZMIK indicate that he, as its main staff person, worked on a whole range of tasks and projects. The top priority of the committee was to build a strong central immigrant organization with local, district and even provincial chapters. It was JJ's job to support the local chapters and to communicate with them through their locally chosen (sometimes, centrally appointed) representatives. Late into the night JJ sat at his typewriter and banged out letter after letter to representatives in some 200 communities. He urged them to collect the \$0.50 per adult levy which enabled the ZMIK to do its work. He encouraged them to care for the very destitute in their midst. He arranged for shipments of used clothing to needy communities. He distributed small libraries of German language and religious books (ordered through contacts in Germany) to help groups nurture their language and faith. He tried to ensure that remote communities without ministers were served at least occasionally by itinerant preachers.

A special task that JJ undertook as part of his job was to help immigrants redeem German war bonds. Evidently some Russian Mennonites had purchased government bonds during the brief period that German forces had occupied southern Russia during 1918 and they were now seeking to redeem them. Over the course of several years, more than \$6500 was collected from the German government on behalf of the purchasers.<sup>29</sup> For its services, the ZMIK received a two percent commission. It appears that neither JJ, nor other members of the committee, perceived the irony and incongruity of a supposedly pacifist people helping to fund, and now benefitting from, the German war effort.

Another project to which JJ devoted his energies was the formation of a mutual aid fund for hospital and medical care. One of the commitments made by the Board of Colonization to the Canadian government was that no immigrant would become a public charge in any way during the first five years of life in Canada. Thus, it was imperative that a mechanism be created that would help immigrants share the financial costs which illness imposed and which, if not paid, could result in deportation. A mutual aid society, similar to ones in Russia, was one such mechanism. Initially, the ZMIK administered the society, with JJ acting as its secretary, but eventually the society incorporated independently. For a few dollars per year, families could receive \$12.50 for the birth of a child, as well as 25 to 37 percent of the cost of other health-related

expenses. JJ became a member of the society early on, which proved very beneficial. With the complications attending son Walter’s birth, JJ made a claim for and received \$29 to help cover the additional medical expenses incurred. By the end of three years, the society had 370 member families and had paid out over \$3000 to 138 of them.

### **Love for Canada**

The ZMIK encouraged immigrants to become Canadian citizens as soon as possible. At the 1929 annual meeting, JJ reported that the executive had explored with the government the possibility of Mennonites receiving citizenship as a group rather than as individuals. Evidently the requirement of facility in the English language was preventing some immigrants from taking out citizenship as early as they wished. At that same meeting, delegates instructed the ZMIK executive to write a letter to the Prime Minister conveying their deep gratitude for their new home, Canada, and their desire and commitment to live as honest, industrious and loyal citizens. The letter, signed by chairperson D.H. Epp and secretary J.J. Thiessen stated:

The delegates to the eighth general conference of recent Mennonite immigrants . . . feel themselves obligated to show their gratitude to the highly esteemed Canadian government for the privilege of having been permitted to come to this country where they can live in peace and contentment. It is possible for them to here live their faith which is their highest possession. They are glad that the country has a well-established educational system which affords their younger generation an opportunity for preparing themselves for service. They are further glad that the country offers them the possibility of engaging in that work which has been their occupation for centuries past—agriculture. The endeavour of Mennonites, individual or jointly, are directed to developing this occupation among their people.

The delegates realize the opportunities that this country gives them, but wish never to forget that opportunity entails obligation and duty. They wish to become a factor in the development of agriculture and social upbuilding of the nation, and would feel themselves honoured if they were able to help in this even if only in a small measure, wherever they make their homes and are permitted to enjoy the privileges of our beloved Canadian country.<sup>30</sup>

The letter is instructive in a number of ways. First of all, it is one of the earliest of JJ’s English letters to have been preserved. Assuming that JJ as secretary composed it, it reveals that by 1929, two years into his studies at the Rosthern Academy, he had already developed a very good command of English. Despite his age—he was past his mid-thirties—he

had mastered another very difficult language. He would always speak English with a heavy accent and would always feel most comfortable in German—especially for preaching and praying—but there can be no doubt that he acquired fluency in English.

The letter also very much reveals JJ's feelings about his chosen home. Although on occasion he yearned nostalgically for the Russia of his youth, he understood fully that a return to that place and time was impossible. Thus he embraced Canada with a fierce love and loyalty. Canada had provided refuge for his people when their way of life was under threat; it allowed them to worship and live according to the values dear to them; and it gave all who desired an opportunity to work and to make a contribution. As he wrote to a friend in Russia in 1929, the great distances and harsh climate left some things to be desired, but there was no doubt that Canada, more than any other place, offered the best possibilities for Mennonite freedom and development.<sup>31</sup> With time, even the bitterly cold Saskatchewan winters became dear to JJ. Some years later, while travelling to Chicago by train, a fellow passenger noisily cursed the cold. After she had carried on for a time, he jumped to his feet and made an eloquent defence of Canada's beautiful winter.<sup>32</sup> His love for Canada eventually embraced even the harsh climate. JJ obtained his Canadian citizenship on July 28 1932 and Tina hers on July 8, 1937.

Along with JJ's love for Canada went an interest in the country's political process. The first election he witnessed—the 1929 Saskatchewan provincial election—pitted the Liberal government of Premier Gardiner against the Conservative opposition of J.T.M. Anderson and had much relevance for Mennonites. One of the promises Anderson made in his campaign was to stop further immigration of non-English-speaking foreigners, including Mennonites, into Saskatchewan. Since 1927 public sentiment had shifted against the Mennonites due, at least in part, to the Friesen-Braun trials. Labour groups, farm groups, Legionnaires, Masons and even the Klu Klux Klan got on board the bandwagon that demanded Mennonites be kept out.<sup>33</sup> JJ viewed all this with considerable dismay, especially in light of the deteriorating situation in Russia and his hope that members of his family might still come to Canada. When a candidates' meeting was held in Rosthern in May, JJ was there to observe and to listen.<sup>34</sup> Although he could not yet vote, he clearly hoped that the Liberal candidate would win. And indeed, largely because of the Mennonite vote in the Rosthern constituency, the candidate was returned.<sup>35</sup> Like many Mennonites, JJ quickly developed a deep sense of loyalty to the Liberal party. He never forgot that it was the Liberal government of William Lyon Mackenzie King which had rescinded the post-war Order-in-Council barring Mennonite immigration.

Because of King’s action, JJ believed all Mennonites owed the Liberals their political loyalty. His affinity for the Liberal party would last a lifetime.

### **Involvement with the Church**

As soon as they arrived in Rosthern, Tina and JJ became active in the Rosthern local of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church, and on Pentecost 1928 they were accepted as members into the congregation. JJ’s gifts as a teacher were quickly recognized. Before long he was teaching Sunday school and assisting with the *Jugendverein*, or Christian Endeavour as it was known in English. At this bi-weekly Sunday evening program planned for and with youth, a typical evening consisted of various recitations, musical numbers and a brief meditation.

On January 13, 1929, he was elected as a minister of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church. This meant that he assisted in the preaching ministry, mostly in Rosthern but also in other locals. Already as a young person in Russia, JJ had been urged to let his name stand for election to the ministry, but he had declined because he felt it important to have more theological education. During the German occupation in 1918, he had explored the possibilities of studying at an evangelical seminary in Basel, Switzerland, but political uncertainties had prevented that.<sup>36</sup> A decade later, his response to the call to ministry was different. Perhaps because in the Canadian context many ministers had much less education than he, perhaps because of a greater awareness of his own gifts, perhaps because this time he heard the call as more clearly a call from God—JJ agreed. In a letter he wrote, “I felt the weight of the responsibility and my great weakness.”<sup>37</sup>

In 1927 he attended his first annual convention of the Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada (CMC). The conference had been founded in 1903 by the Rosenorter Church in Saskatchewan and the Bergthaler Church in Manitoba (not to be confused with the Bergthaler Church in Saskatchewan) for the purpose of working together on matters such as missions and education. Conference delegates, mostly ministers, met each year in early July for worship, fellowship and decision making on joint efforts. By 1927 a total of 18 congregations was represented at the CMC sessions. This now included the United Mennonite Church of Ontario, whose *Ältester* was Jacob H. Janzen, as well as an Alberta congregation. David Toews had been elected as chairperson in 1914 and continued in that role almost every year until 1941.

The 1927 sessions of the conference were held in Herbert, Saskatchewan. David Toews, knowing of JJ’s interest in the wider church, encouraged him to attend as an observer. Since he was not yet a full

member of the Rosenorter church, JJ was not eligible to represent the congregation as a delegate. He was eager to go and found a means of earning the five dollars necessary for the train ticket. He thoroughly enjoyed his experience at Herbert, including the presentations on issues of doctrine and theology, the reports on immigration and mission work, and the conversations with old friends and new ones. He was particularly moved by the testimony of one minister who shared a personal story. The minister had promised his sons that he would save money so that the family could purchase their very first car. But when he heard of the church's appeal for donations to mission work, he had decided to contribute money saved for the car—an amount of \$500—to the mission fund.<sup>38</sup> The fact that JJ never owned a car all his life suggests that the story had a lasting impact. This conference was also the first time he remembered being queried, “Are you a *Russländer*?” This introduction to the CMC was very important for JJ. In the next 50 years, he would miss only one annual session.

#### **“All beginnings are hard”**

The early years in Canada—the Rosthern years—were difficult ones for the Thiessen family. Although they were thankful for the way Canada had opened its doors to them, the adjustments that living in Canada required were enormous. All was so new and so different from life as they had known it. Despite his generally optimistic nature, JJ found these years a struggle and he frequently quoted the old German saying, “All beginnings are hard.” The Thiessens were fortunate to live in a community where there was a significant concentration of Mennonites and of recent immigrants. Within the family of faith, they found support, understanding and fellowship, especially from David and Margareta Toews.

For almost all immigrants, a great concern was the payment of the *Reiseschuld*. While some had the resources to pay their way to Canada, or at least a portion of it, most had come on credit. They now needed to pay their debt as soon as they possibly could. In this regard, the Thiessens were better off than many immigrants since they had earned some cash from their auction in Russia and because JJ had managed to find work fairly soon upon their arrival. They did not have to wait for an unpredictable harvest to determine what they could afford to pay. The Board of Colonization account books indicate that JJ made the first payment of \$120 toward the total cost of \$624 on December 13, 1926.<sup>39</sup> Presumably he hand-delivered this amount while on his first trip to Rosthern soon after setting foot in Canada. Thereafter payments were made fairly regularly until the full amount, including approximately \$35 interest, was

<u>Thiessen Jacob Joh II<sup>nd</sup></u>			
Acc # 12,445 - 1926 Nov 25 <sup>th</sup> 1929			
	Dr	Cr	Balance
1926 Dec 15 Payment on transp. 4579		120.00	
Apr 13 Transactation per acc	543.31		
" Special expenses	72.00		
" Special loan	9.00		Dr. 504.31
" 8 Paid on transp. note # 761,368		102.00	Dr. 404.31
--- 14. Payment on transp. 1140.		135.00	Dr. 268.31
June 7. Pymt. on transp. - Albr. Brn. 2841.		17.85	Dr. 251.46
--- " " " " J.P. Th. 2842.		25.00	Dr. 226.46
Nov 12. Payment on transp. - Albr. Brn. 3741.		30.00	Dr. 196.46
Dec 22. " " " " J.J. Th. 4455.		50.00	Dr. 146.46
--- 21 Interest due Dec 31st 1926 4102	4.39		Dr. 150.85
--- 22 " " " " 4102	18.94		Dr. 169.79
--- 27. Payment on transp. 325.		36.00	Dr. 133.79
Nov 25. Toward acct to P. S. G.	647.62	507.85	Dr. 139.79
<hr/>			
1928.	Dr.	Cr.	Balance
Nov. 23. Brought forward fr. 1927. 139.79	647.62	507.85	Dr. 139.79
--- 19. Payment - Albr. Brn. 5186		100.00	Dr. 39.79
Dec. 21. Interest due.	4185	8.01	Dr. 47.80
1929 July 12. Interest due	264.	-.66	Dr. 48.47
--- " " " " Payment	272	20.92	Dr. 27.55
Oct. 21. Interest due	3293.	1.28	Dr. 28.93
--- " " " " Payment in full	3282	28.93	---
	657.70	657.70	---

J.J. Thiessen managed to pay the family's Reiseschuld by 1929. Above is the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization's record of the Thiessens' account. MHCA

paid on October 21, 1929.<sup>40</sup> This would have meant the closing of the *Reiseschuld* account if JJ had not taken out a special loan of \$100 from the Board in the spring of 1927. This particular loan, perhaps to help the family get settled in Rosthern, accumulated interest of \$42 until 1937 when only a \$15 balance remained. Correspondence with David Toews indicates that JJ considered this loan part of his *Reiseschuld* and it weighed heavily on him.

There are other indications that the Thiessens felt a financial crunch. On a number of occasions JJ received an advance on his monthly salary, suggesting that he and Tina had difficulty making ends meet. The family incurred significant medical costs with only minimal insurance. A loan

of \$51 from ZMIK to help pay for JJ's education at the German-English Academy went unpaid until at least 1939. In addition, JJ had a habit of giving away money to needy folks. For example, when Abram Braun decided around 1930 that he wanted to seek his fortune in the east, JJ promptly handed over his last \$20 and bade him farewell.<sup>41</sup> There was never extra money in the Thiessen family purse.

Perhaps even more difficult than the lack of money was the sheer exhaustion which plagued both JJ and Tina. Each day he studied hard at the Academy. He returned home in the late afternoon, spent some time with the children and then began his "workday" with ZMIK. Often typing until three or four o'clock in the morning, he was always without sufficient sleep. It was during these years that he began to experience periods of faintness and weakness and that he noticed his thick dark hair rapidly thinning and turning grey.<sup>42</sup>

Tina suffered even more. Although she had regained her weight and health during the first years in Canada, the recovery was short-lived. Caring virtually alone for four young children, all of whom experienced their share of childhood illnesses, cooking for the family and for three hungry boarders, keeping a cramped and crowded home to her exacting standards of neatness and cleanliness—all this was simply too much. She lost weight and, in the summer of 1929, experienced a total physical collapse. The doctor's diagnosis was pleurisy with possibility of tuberculosis. Tina spent seven weeks in the Saskatoon sanatorium away from the family. Very soon after that, perhaps even while in the sanatorium, she was also diagnosed with breast cancer. This required surgery and several more weeks in St. Paul's Hospital.<sup>43</sup>

Tina's illness and absence were very difficult for the whole family. The children, ages 1 to 9, missed her warm and nurturing presence. JJ was overwhelmed with the burden of caring for the family, in addition to doing his work for ZMIK and his assignments at the Academy. Unable to cope, he hired a teenage girl to move in and assist with the children and the housework. But that meant additional expense on top of the unexpected doctor and hospital bills. The records of the mutual aid society indicate that JJ received \$110 toward the total cost of \$375 for the treatment of Tina's illnesses.<sup>44</sup> He borrowed another \$115 from the Relief Fund of the Board of Colonization.<sup>45</sup> It is a mystery how he managed to pay the rest of the bills.

At the time, illnesses such as breast cancer were not discussed openly. Therefore, information about Tina's encounter with this potentially life-threatening disease was shared with only a few close friends, such as David and Margareta Toews.<sup>46</sup> If there had not been such social silence about the female body, the Thiessen family likely would have received

more practical and emotional support at the time of this crisis. As it was, they seem to have suffered quite alone.<sup>47</sup> Some six months later, JJ admitted to being filled with much anxiety and doubt at the time. A passage of scripture that was helpful to him was Psalm 62:1, “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation” (*NRSV*).

### **Suffering under the Soviets**

If their own troubles were not daunting enough, JJ was deeply worried about his relatives back in the Soviet Union. In June 1928 he received a telegram from his older brother saying that their father, Johann Thiessen, had died in Klippenfeld at the age of 64. When JJ bade his father farewell two years earlier, he had known that this day would come. Even so, the pain of being separated from family and unable to join in the burial and grieving rituals ran deep. Moreover, his concerns about his youngest and, now orphaned, brother Abram intensified.

JJ and other immigrants were aware that after 1926 the situation for Mennonites in the Soviet Union had become increasingly precarious. Dissolution of the *Verband* in 1926, along with mounting obstacles to emigration, meant that many fewer Mennonites who wished to leave for Canada were able to do so. In the years 1927 and 1928, less than a thousand arrived on Canadian soil. The opportunity for an escape was rapidly ending. At the same time, there was increasing harassment at other levels. Several Mennonite publications were forced to cease production. Military exemption, although still technically possible, became almost impossible to secure. In 1929 the government renewed its attack on religion by closing churches and monasteries, exiling thousands of ministers and making Sunday a workday. This anti-religious drive was accompanied by intense communist and atheist propaganda in the schools and through various youth organizations.

In October 1928 the Soviet government, now led by Joseph Stalin, also initiated the First Five-Year Plan. Under the New Economic Policy (1921–1928), agriculture and small industry had been permitted to operate privately in large measure. This had proven successful in terms of overall economic gains. However, the main groups to gain from the New Economic Policy were, according to Soviet analysis, the prosperous peasants or kulaks in the villages, a group which constituted approximately 5 percent of the population. The peasant masses benefitted least. The first Five-Year Plan was therefore intended to eliminate the kulak class and to collectivize the entire agricultural sector. In the years since 1922, many Mennonites had once again become reasonably prosperous, at least in relation to the Russian peasantry. For this reason they were considered kulaks. As such, many men and sometimes entire families



were sent into exile in far-off Siberia or Central Asia. Those spared such a fate were forced onto collective farms. Desperation grew within the Mennonite colonies. In the fall of 1929, a flood of thousands of people—not only Mennonites—descended upon Moscow in the frantic hope that authorities would grant them permission to leave.

The letters reaching the Thiessens from their relatives in the Soviet Union arrived irregularly and sometimes not at all. And by the early 1930s, as Stalin's regime sought to silence all dissent, those letters ceased completely. But if JJ's information was sketchy, he knew enough that he was filled with fear, but there was so little that he could do to alleviate his family's distress. He did instruct his brother Johann to distribute his share of the family inheritance to his siblings.<sup>48</sup> He also contributed to the Board of Colonization's 1929 initiative to send food parcels to relatives. But all this seemed so little. As he lamented to a friend, "The worst is when one wants to help but cannot."<sup>49</sup> Hoping somehow to bring his family to Canada before it was too late, JJ began to prepare the documents that would enable them to gain entry to the country. When his first application proved problematic, he prepared a second one.<sup>50</sup> But the prospects of re-uniting his family on Canadian soil were becoming gloomier by the day. Not only were Soviet doors closing to those who wished to leave, but Canada's doors were closing to those who wished to enter. The federal government of Mackenzie King was open to admitting more Mennonite immigrants, but provincial governments were not at all favourably disposed to the idea, least of all the new Saskatchewan government of J.T.M. Anderson. Time was rapidly running out.

The suffering of family and co-religionists remaining in the Soviet Union was something that continued to tear at JJ's heart. It also continued to bring perspective to the struggles and worries that he encountered in his own life in Canada. Although the first years in Canada had been difficult, and the onset of the Depression would bring new troubles, none of these could compare with the cross which those left behind in the old country had to bear. In the next years, JJ's most immediate concerns would turn to the city of Saskatoon and the ministry there, and he would have less direct involvement with issues of relief and immigration. Still, his concern for suffering sisters and brothers—of the family and the faith—would continue to weigh heavily on his heart and mind.

## 6

1930–1939

### Early Ministry in Saskatoon

In June 1930 JJ Thiessen graduated from the German-English Academy. During the three years of study he had mastered the English language, completed the requirements for public school teaching and was ready to return to the teaching profession. However, his friend and mentor, David Toews, had other plans for him. Toews and other area ministers had a growing concern for Mennonites who had moved to the city of Saskatoon and who were without a church home. Toews wanted JJ to become the shepherd for these sheep.

The city of Saskatoon had undergone considerable change since its founding in 1882. Begun as a temperance colony by a group of Ontario settlers, it quickly emerged as a service and business centre for the surrounding agricultural community. In 1909 it also became home of the University of Saskatchewan. During the 1920s, as the price of wheat rose, so did Saskatoon's fortunes. Between 1921 and 1931, the population grew from 25,000 to 43,000, while a spate of building activity resulted in major expansions to two hospitals, the construction of a tuberculosis sanatorium and the completion of three high schools and seven elementary schools. Saskatoon's prosperity meant that by 1930 the city also boasted 13 car dealerships, 30 filling stations and 15 garages.

That same fall, a full year after the stock market crash, the Depression hit Saskatoon with full force. The collapse of the world economy meant that by December 1930 wheat was trading at only 59 cents per bushel. As the Thirties wore on, a prolonged and parching drought caused crops to shrivel and burn while blinding dust storms carried topsoil to distant places. Many farmers abandoned their farms and headed for Saskatoon, but "as went the farmer so went the city."<sup>1</sup> By 1932 there were more than 2000 residents on direct city relief, and a large relief camp at the exhibition grounds became home for hundreds of single unemployed men. Two years later one-fifth of the city's population was "on the dole." The creation of a Relief Board, with very stringent regulations governing who was eligible for public assistance, resulted in several angry public demonstrations, some of which were dispersed by police. On one occasion a group of women with children occupied City Hall for a 30-

hour period. At another time a police officer was killed by men grown desperate with the hopelessness of their situation. Eventually public unrest was channelled into the political arena with the creation of the Farmer-Labour Party in 1932 and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in 1933. Saskatoon's economic fortunes did not fully recover until well into the Second World War.

### **Mennonite Beginnings in Saskatoon**

According to 1931 census figures, Saskatoon had 493 persons who identified themselves as Mennonites; ten years earlier there had been only 24. That so many had made Saskatoon their home is significant, given the low regard Mennonites generally had for city life. Most Mennonites considered cities evil places which, with their cinemas, dance halls and drinking parlours, lured young people from the straight and narrow faith in which they had been raised.<sup>2</sup> Remaining "on the land" was considered essential to preserving the faith. Among the Old Colony and Bergthaler churches, movement to the city represented a sin that frequently resulted in excommunication. Most *Russländer* had a similar concern about the dangers and temptations of city life, but that fear was tempered by practical considerations. Burdened with their *Reiseschuld* and other debts incurred in purchasing farms, immigrant parents realized that their daughters could help pay off those debts by working as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy Saskatoon residents. Therefore, they reluctantly sent their daughters to Saskatoon, even if anxious over what might become of them. The city also attracted *Russländer* Mennonites who, because of personal inclination or education, simply were not cut out to be farmers.

As early as 1925, a small group of Saskatoon Mennonites began to meet for worship.<sup>3</sup> The group consisted primarily of single women working as domestics, a handful of male university students and a few families. They met in a variety of places, including a Presbyterian college, facilities of the British and Foreign Bible Society, then in a grocery store office, the YWCA and finally, the newly built Victoria Public School. Ministers from the Rosenorter Church at Rosthern and the Nordheimer Church at Dundurn took turns travelling by train to Saskatoon to hold Thursday evening devotionals with the single women and Sunday worship services with the entire group. The small group held a regular offering to defray the travelling expenses of the visiting ministers as well as to pay the rental fee for their meeting place.

By 1928 the group had grown sufficiently that it could begin to consider larger issues of organization and leadership. There were two main needs. One was someone who could provide ongoing spiritual

leadership for the emerging congregation. Visiting rural ministers were appreciated, but they could not visit the sick in hospitals and the sanatorium, nor address the spiritual needs of the urban context in an ongoing way. Also needed was a *Mädchenheim* (girls' home)—a place where young Mennonite women working in the city could find temporary accommodation, assistance in locating work, friendship and fellowship among their own kind, and spiritual and emotional guidance from church-appointed adults. Similar homes had been established in a variety of Canadian cities by groups such as the YWCA and the Salvation Army, and two Mennonite homes were already in existence in Winnipeg. The homes were seen as a means of preventing innocent young women from falling prey to the multitude of seductive evils that awaited them in the city. The Saskatoon group felt that the purchase of a large house could serve as both the *Mädchenheim* and the congregational meeting place.

The biggest obstacle was lack of money. The working women could not be counted on for financial assistance. They received only meagre wages and these were intended to help pay the family *Reiseschuld*. Among the city families, probably only the Schellenberg family had money to invest in a building. The five Schellenberg brothers ran a wholesale business and a chain of groceries called O.K. Economy Stores. At a special meeting in January 1928, attended by the *Ältesten* of both the Nordheimer and Rosenorter Churches, David Toews suggested an appeal to the Home Mission Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church for financial help.

The General Conference Mennonite Church was founded in 1860 in the United States, but by the 1920s encompassed a number of Canadian congregations, including the Rosenorter Church. Most of the immigrant churches of *kirchliche* persuasion, founded in Canada in the 1920s and 1930s, became members of the General Conference and became known, colloquially, as “GC” churches. From the beginning, the General Conference made missions a priority. This included foreign missions (evangelistic activity among non-Christians) and home missions (support for fledgling and far-flung Mennonite congregations and groups). Considering the Canadian west a home mission field, the General Conference Home Mission Board had sent missionaries to Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta around the turn of the century to minister to scattered Mennonite groups. This created some tensions with the Canadian Conference which had its own itinerant ministers serving the same communities. To resolve these problems, the two bodies decided to “divide the field” with the General Conference taking responsibility for Alberta, the Canadian Conference for Manitoba and both of them “sharing” Saskatchewan. The General Conference Home Mission Board

also appointed David Toews, who had been elected a member in 1911, as superintendent of its “Canadian field.” The hope was that his appointment would facilitate better communication and cooperation with the Canadian Conference home mission efforts.

David Toews served on the GC Home Mission Board as “Canadian superintendent” until the mid-1940s. In this capacity, Toews wielded considerable power and had “authority to dispense funds to workers almost at his own discretion, with minimal reporting back to the board.”<sup>4</sup> During the 1920s he arranged for the GC Home Mission Board to provide allowances for immigrant ministers serving their scattered flock. In 1926 it was reported to the triennial session of the General Conference that a total of 22 immigrant ministers were receiving monthly allowances from the Home Mission Board.<sup>5</sup> At that same convention, delegates approved a recommendation that special “homes” for young working women, mostly new immigrants, be established in both Winnipeg and Saskatoon.

A *Mädchenheim* was soon operating in Winnipeg, but things progressed more slowly in Saskatoon. It could be that there was not yet a clear enough call from the Saskatoon residents. Or perhaps Toews himself had not taken the necessary steps to make the home a reality. But by 1929 the situation had changed. In response to appeals from a Saskatoon group of Mennonites, Toews made a very specific request to the 1929 General Conference session for the allocation of funds for hiring a city mission worker and purchasing a suitable building. The conference delegates responded by approving a \$10,000 grant for these twin purposes. As it turned out, that large sum of money was never raised, but at least Toews had received a mandate upon which he could act.

### **Mission Worker**

The first step was to hire a worker. In the spring of 1930 Toews approached JJ, asking him to serve as part-time General Conference Home Mission worker in Saskatoon at a wage of \$30 per month. According to JJ’s recollections, it took him six weeks to make a decision. The low salary, the fact that the job was only half-time, the prospect of trying to attend to two jobs in two different localities (he was still working for the ZMIK in Rosthern)—all these may have figured in his deliberations. Another consideration may have been his sense of calling. From early childhood he had been drawn to the teaching profession. He had spent six years of study to prepare for a teaching career in Russia, and had just completed three years of retraining for the Canadian school system. Now he was being asked to set aside his chosen and seemingly

God-given vocation for service in the church. It was not that JJ had strong reservations about ministry—he was already an elected minister in the Rosenorter Church—but accepting the Saskatoon assignment meant regarding his ministry as his paid work, at least on a part-time basis. This was a radical departure from the traditional understanding of ministry as something done voluntarily and without pay, and he may have had concerns as to the wisdom of accepting remuneration for work that was given in service to God. Moreover, he believed in the importance of theological education for those charged with preaching and teaching and building the church. He lacked such an education and was keenly aware of it. However, he was also learning that a call to ministry had less to do with formal study than with one's inner spirit. He finally agreed to the assignment.

On Thursday, July 23, 1930, JJ made his first trip to Saskatoon as the new city mission worker. That evening he met with the working women at Victoria School for Bible study and fellowship. On Friday and Saturday he made a number of house calls and visited people who were in the hospital or sanatorium. On Sunday morning he participated in a Sunday school program that had been started the previous year by Benno Toews, son of David and Margareta Toews, who was studying at the university. Later that evening he led the assembled congregation in worship, and next morning took the train back to Rosthern. This became the pattern which JJ followed for the next six months. From Monday morning to Thursday afternoon he was in Rosthern, carrying on with his work for ZMIK, and from Thursday evening to Sunday he was in Saskatoon. While in the city, he stayed with families who participated in the Sunday evening worship services.

One of the priorities that JJ set for himself during those early months was to make an inventory of all the Mennonites living in Saskatoon. This was no easy task, since telephones were still rare, people were scattered throughout the city, and many did not know of or participate in the regular worship events. In his first quarterly report to the Home Mission Board in October, he wrote that he had made contact with approximately 60 families and 35 young adults, mostly young men who were studying at the Normal School, the University or the city high schools. In addition, approximately 60 young working women attended the Thursday night meetings.<sup>6</sup> One of the observations he made about his visits with the families was how many of them were suffering because of unemployment, a situation that would intensify as the Depression deepened.

After only a few months, there was talk of increasing JJ's assignment to full time and moving him and his family to Saskatoon. By October, the congregation wrote to David Toews, making this request. Toews also



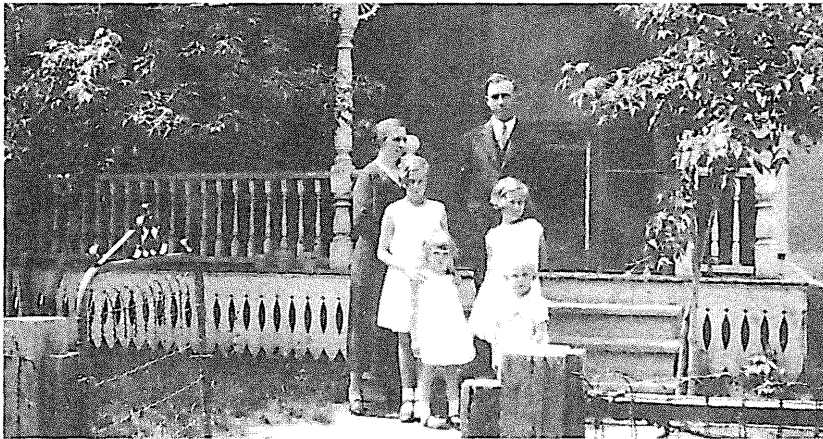
*JJ and Tina ca. 1932 with Hedie (12), Katie (9), Helen (4) and Walter (2).*

received a letter signed by 36 young women, expressing their deep desire for a full-fledged *Mädchenheim*.<sup>7</sup> Toews' response was to encourage the trustees committee of the congregation to search for a dwelling that could serve as the Thiessens' residence as well as a *Mädchenheim*, and to identify the level of financial support that the group could contribute toward such a building. He also wrote to the Home Mission Board office in the United States, urging that the Board allocate \$100 per month to cover JJ's salary and rent for the residence. As he explained to W.S. Gottshall of the Mission Board, "Bro. Thiessen seems to have the sympathy among the people in Saskatoon and we could hardly get a better man."<sup>8</sup> For some reason, Gottshall replied neither to this letter nor a second one. In the meantime, JJ wrote to the Home Mission Board, apologizing for advocating on his own behalf, yet also alluding to the difficulties of trying to do justice to a job that required full-time energy.<sup>9</sup> In the end, David Toews proceeded on his own, informing JJ, the congregation and the women to make the necessary arrangements for JJ's full-time ministry and the family's move to Saskatoon. He later apologized to Gottshall for moving ahead unilaterally; Gottshall reassured him that he had acted in an appropriate way.<sup>10</sup>

In early January the Thiessen family moved from Rosthern to a rented apartment in Saskatoon which was to serve as their home as well as the *Mädchenheim*. Obviously, it was too small to provide meeting space for the emerging congregation, and the group continued to worship in the rented facilities of Victoria School. After only six months the apartment was also too small to host the 75 women who attended the Thursday night gatherings and to offer several nights' lodging for those looking for work. Many nights the whole family slept in one room so as to free the second room for their guests. In the summer of 1931, the Thiessens and the *Mädchenheim* moved to a larger dwelling at 337 Fifth Avenue North, where they would remain for the next decade.

### **The *Mädchenheim***

JJ was now employed full time as a city missionary under the General Conference Home Mission Board with responsibilities for establishing and running a *Mädchenheim* and providing leadership for the emerging congregation. In many ways, the name *Mädchenheim* or “girls home” is a misnomer because the “girls” were not really girls; they were young women. Although some were in their mid-teens, the majority were older, with some in their forties. They were referred to as “girls” because they were all single—they had not yet gone through the rite of passage of marriage—and therefore not arrived at “true” adulthood. The young women varied greatly, not only in age but in levels of education, in upbringing and in religious conviction. Some had received a good education in Russia, while others had only a few years of elementary



*The Thiessen family in front of their rented house at 337 Fifth Avenue North, ca. 1932*



school. Some already knew English well; others learned on the job. Some took their work and their responsibility to help the family pay the *Reiseschuld* very seriously, while others, particularly the younger ones, were out “for a good time.” Among those who came from formerly wealthy families were some young women who now understood what their Russian servants had experienced in years gone by.<sup>11</sup>

JJ and Tina saw their role as “houseparents” as twofold: to help the young women find employment and to provide spiritual guidance. From the day the Thiessens moved to Saskatoon, they posted ads in the local paper, saying, “Mennonite girls want work by the month. Phone 7541.” A telephone was a necessity for matching young women with their prospective employers. The Thiessens quickly learned that the best places for young Mennonite women were the wealthier homes where salaries were higher—\$10 or \$15 per month—and where women could also receive room and board. Restaurants and hotels were considered unsatisfactory because they would bring young women into contact with alcohol and other negative influences. As it turned out, many of them found themselves serving alcoholic beverages in the homes anyway.

The Thiessens tried to ensure that the employers were ones who would treat their “maids” with decency and respect, but they were not always successful. JJ and Tina were extremely busy, and did not always know what went on in the various work places. In addition, the times were such that there was greater social acceptance for practices and working conditions that today would be considered clearly exploitative. Quite a number of young women found themselves in very stressful situations. Some, for instance, were required to serve at parties until past midnight only to rise again at 4 a.m. to begin the next day’s work. One young woman worked for the lady of the house all day, and then in the husband’s pharmacy every evening till nine p.m. Another one, employed by a United Church minister, regularly slept only four hours each night. Her feet suffered permanent injury from almost constant standing. It was also not uncommon for young women to prepare sumptuous meals for their employers, only to be allowed much more meagre fare for their own sustenance. Whether any of the young women experienced sexual harassment in their places of work requires further research. In at least one instance, a young woman found herself in the employ of a physician who had sexually abused her predecessor. This brave young woman managed to ward off the doctor’s advances, but she soon left his employ. Unfortunately, she did not feel free to talk to either JJ or Tina about this.<sup>12</sup>

In general, Mennonite women were in big demand among Saskatoon residents wanting domestic help although, as the Depression deepened,

there were more women in need of work and fewer employers able to provide it. Mennonites had a reputation for being conscientious, modest and dependable workers. In fairly short order, the Thiessens were not only hunting down new jobs, they were also receiving calls from employers looking for “maids.” Some days the incessant ringing of the phone and the constant traffic of young women made the Thiessen household a very busy place indeed.

For JJ, nurturing these young women in their faith was as important as helping them to find a suitable work placement, perhaps more so. Thus, he strongly encouraged them to participate in the life of the church by regularly attending worship, as well as taking catechism classes (if they were not yet baptized), singing in the choir, attending the *Jugendverein* and teaching Sunday school. Most importantly, he urged them to attend the Thursday evening *Mädchenheim* gatherings. Throughout the city of Saskatoon, domestic servants had Thursday afternoons and evenings off. For this reason, Thursday became *Mädchenheim* day. The workers arrived at the Thiessen home in mid-afternoon. They shared the sandwiches which they had brought with them and the coffee and *Platz* which Tina had prepared for the evening. While they ate, they chatted about the experiences of the past week. Following the meal, JJ offered a devotional and then read from a German literary work or from one of the church periodicals. The women occupied themselves with various kinds of handiwork while he read. From time to time their hand-made articles were sold at special sales with the proceeds going to support the congregation or some mission project. Frequently they played the piano and sang. The evening ended with the singing of “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds” and a lengthy prayer in which JJ lifted up the particular concerns expressed by the women present.<sup>13</sup>

Match-making was not one of JJ’s official duties; neither did he take it on as an unofficial responsibility. But, because it was assumed that single women working in Saskatoon would eventually marry and establish their own homes, he was very concerned that women from the *Mädchenheim* find appropriate mates, that is, God-fearing Mennonite men. Prospective husbands were to be found amongst the single men who lived in the city and participated in the congregation, and those who lived in neighbouring rural communities. *Mädchenheim* women could readily meet and mingle with the city men at weekly choir practices or *Jugendvereine*, and a good deal of courting took place in the context of regular church functions. However, there were not enough eligible bachelors at the church to go around, so after a while special events were organized occasionally to bring young men from the rural areas to the city. In winter, Victoria School was rented for socials where traditional



*The Thiessen family and the women of the Mädchenheim in June 1935. Photo: Patkau, First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon.*

Russian Mennonite circle games were played. These events were held with JJ's encouragement and blessing. He often had a twinkle in his eye and a knowing smile on his face if a young man and woman "discovered" each other at these or other church-related functions.<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes men came to JJ looking for prospective wives. One such person was H.T. Klaassen, minister in the Eigenheim Mennonite Church near Rosthern. In 1936 Klaassen's first wife Judith died, leaving him with nine young children, the oldest being 14. He soon learned that "in order to fill the great void within and without, and also to establish a normal family life for the children, I would have to consider remarriage."<sup>15</sup> He knew JJ quite well and thus approached him, asking whether there might be someone from the *Mädchenheim* who would make a suitable wife for him and mother for his children. JJ quickly thought of Elizabeth (Liese) Pauls of Sonningdale who was working in the home of Dr. R.H. MacDonald, a medical doctor. When Klaassen agreed, JJ approached Liese in private and spoke to her about Klaassen's interest in marriage. Liese assented to the request and JJ married the couple on April 21, 1938 in the Eigenheim Mennonite Church. Many of the marriage ceremonies which he performed in these early years were "*Mädchenheim*" weddings.

JJ saw himself as a father figure toward the women of the *Mädchenheim*. He clearly felt responsibility for them while they were in the city, and he made it his business to know each one, where she came from, where she was employed and what was going on in her life. Because of his amazing memory, he could retain all this information with ease. This ability, combined with his warm and personable nature—he loved to joke and tease and call the women by special nicknames—endearred him to many of them. He made them feel like they were special, and many thus came to him for counsel and for prayer. A number even developed "a crush" on him.<sup>16</sup> At the same time there were those who chafed under his zealous interest in their personal lives. As one young woman commented, "We couldn't do anything that he didn't know."<sup>17</sup>

Along with JJ's fatherly concern went a very strict code of behaviour. Among the more serious violations were associating with non-Mennonite men and going to the movies or dance halls. If a young woman dated a non-Mennonite, she could expect to hear from JJ, "You will not see him again, will you?" Likewise, if she frequented the movies or dance halls more than once or twice, there was certain admonition. One young woman was told by JJ: "Go wherever you want to go, but always go with Jesus. Remember that if you go to the show, Jesus will stay outside."<sup>18</sup> This young woman did go to the movies on one occasion, but she was plagued with so much guilt that she did not enjoy the experience at all.

Even worse than the movies, of course, were sexual sins, that is, sexual relations outside of marriage. Although infrequent, there were a number of out-of-wedlock pregnancies. We know very little about how JJ handled these situations, but it is clear that he married a number of couples where the bride was already pregnant. Those weddings took place in the Thiessen home with only family members present.

His greatest difficulties lay with the youngest of the women—the girls who were only 15 or 16 or 17 years old. They were the most vulnerable to and easily tempted by the secular ways of city life. They were also the ones who tended to keep their distance from the *Mädchenheim* except when they were without money or job and needed a place to stay. Then they would show up at the Thiessens' front door, and JJ or Tina would invite them in. He struggled with how best to relate to those who showed flagrant disregard for the values of the *Mädchenheim*. He knew that they often returned to their immoral activities and thus harmed the reputation of the home.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes he had harsh words for those who would not turn from their ways. But where individuals demonstrated remorse, he was eager to forgive.<sup>20</sup> His motto from teachers' training, "to individualize and not to generalize," provided somewhat of a canon for the manner in which he dealt with the difficult cases. It was critical that "every individual would be understood and treated properly; the good and the bad character traits should be recognized and accepted. . . ."<sup>21</sup> Thus he preferred to err on the side of grace rather than judgement. He also counselled parents not to allow their daughters to come to Saskatoon until they were 18 years of age or older.

In many ways, JJ's relationship toward the young women today would be regarded as inappropriate. The way he inquired into their personal lives and sometimes treated them as less than adults would be considered out of line. Yet, in the context of the times, his fatherly demeanour was generally accepted and appreciated. His overprotectiveness and overinvolvement is exactly what the Home Mission Board, the churches and the parents of the young women desired. A warm pastoral concern for the women, combined with close scrutiny of their behaviour, was deemed essential to keeping them from being "lost" to the city.

Officially, the Home Mission Board had appointed only JJ as city missionary and director of the *Mädchenheim*, but Tina was also intensely involved in the work of the home. She found jobs for many women and she taught a good number of them how to find their way around, either on foot or by streetcar. Each week, in preparation for the Thursday evening meetings, she washed and waxed the hardwood floors, hauled chairs and benches from the basement and baked large batches of *Zwieback* or *Platz* for the supper meal. At Christmas and Easter she

singlehandedly prepared a traditional Russian Mennonite meal of ham, potatoes and *pluma moos* (a cold fruit soup) for as many as 80 people. Although the home only provided temporary overnight accommodation, at any one time there were several women waiting for job assignments. For Tina, this meant additional cooking, cleaning and washing beyond the work of caring for her family.

JJ was swift to acknowledge Tina's contribution to the work of the home. He frequently noted her assistance in his quarterly reports to the Home Mission Board and always signed her name with his own at the end. In 1937, he wrote:

My dear wife is always a faithful helper. She works from early until late like every housewife. When I am away, she answers the phone, arranges interviews, etc. During these past weeks there have always been 10 to 12 persons at the table for meals; either the girls or someone else comes knocking.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, the times were such that the work of women in supporting and assisting their minister or missionary husbands was simply assumed. Women were expected both to help do their husbands' work and to take on inordinate responsibilities within the home so that husbands could be freed for church ministry. Very little recognition and credit was given for either contribution. It does not appear that the Home Mission Board ever acknowledged or expressed appreciation to Tina for her central role in running the *Mädchenheim*.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Congregation**

JJ's second major responsibility as city mission worker was to give leadership to the Mennonite congregation that had emerged in Saskatoon over the previous several years. The Saskatoon group was not formally organized yet. Three men, David A. Lepp, A. D. Schellenberg and D. J. Klassen, had been elected to serve as trustees in 1927. They attended to the treasury and the logistics of arranging meeting space, and Lepp also acted as secretary. However, it was not until January 1932, a year and a half after JJ had arrived, that the group formally organized as a local of the Rosenorter Church with a charter membership of 34 individuals. JJ was ordained as minister of the Saskatoon local in May 1932. In his enthusiastic way, he threw himself into his work with wholehearted passion. From childhood he had learned the importance of hard work and of doing a job well, so he was committed to giving the Saskatoon assignment his very best energy. But more than a simple work ethic drove him. JJ believed that his call to ministry in Saskatoon was from God and, as such, it held claim to his entire life. His ministry was not a

job that had prescribed limits and boundaries; it was a vocation that demanded his complete loyalty and availability. Thus, he gave himself fully to his work, rarely making space for other pursuits. The extent to which his work consumed his time and energy is probably one of the reasons for the rapid growth of the Saskatoon mission.

The first priority for JJ in ministering to the congregation was leading the Sunday worship services. Initially, services were held on alternate Sunday evenings. The reason for evening worship was to accommodate the women of the *Mädchenheim* almost all of whom had to work on Sunday mornings. Worship services were held in High German and consisted of scripture reading, prayer, hymn-singing (by the choir and the congregation) and the sermon. JJ took responsibility for all aspects of the worship except the music. Within his first months at Saskatoon, he recruited David Paetkau, a music teacher at the German-English Academy in Rosthern, to organize and lead a choir and plan special musical events.

JJ was conscientious and disciplined about writing his sermons. He usually devoted Thursday and Friday mornings to sermon preparation although, when emergencies or other interruptions disrupted his schedule, it was not unusual for him to work late into the night. Early in his ministry, grocery store owner A.D. Schellenberg provided him with a portable typewriter which aided him enormously. Later on, when JJ travelled extensively on wider church business, his trusty typewriter often accompanied him. From the beginning, he typed out his sermons in full, cramming words tightly onto half sheets of paper that were filed into small black binders.<sup>24</sup> With time he became comfortable speaking more extemporaneously, but he continued the practice of writing out his sermons, so that he would have a record of the texts and topics he addressed over the years. He did re-use sermons from time to time, especially ones for special church occasions, but he tried as much as possible to adapt them to the new context.

JJ's sermons were grounded in scripture. He no longer had time to read widely as he had in younger days, but he continued to devote time each day to Bible study and prayer, and these moments provided inspiration for his messages. Without fail, his sermons were based on a short passage of scripture and were intended to offer spiritual food for his parishioners. He consistently affirmed God's ever-present love and care for each person, called on them to repent of their sins, assured them of God's forgiveness and grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus. He exhorted believers to live their lives in light of the Gospel. He spoke in simple and unsophisticated terms. As a minister, he was concerned not to teach abstract theological doctrines, but rather to nurture the relation-

ship of each church member to God and to help each one live more faithfully. Poems and hymns that he had committed to memory as a youth also peppered his reflections.

If Sunday worship was the primary focus of congregational life, JJ had his hand in many other aspects of church life. Alternating with Sunday evening worship was the bi-weekly *Jugendverein* or Christian Endeavour program. Held for some time already, these events were the best attended of all the congregation's regular meetings. It was not unusual for 200 or more young people to attend the Sunday evening programs of music, verse and devotionals. One night a week, JJ met with a committee of young adults to plan these programs.

Among the active participants of the *Jugendverein* were a dozen or more young men who were attending the university or Normal School. JJ took a keen interest in these young fellows and made a point of befriending them and involving them in other aspects of church life. In the fall of 1934, as he anticipated the return of students to the city and to the Normal School, he wrote to David Toews:

Then will come the responsibility of gathering and winning over the young people. I have considered it an important task to be a friend, advisor and spiritual caregiver for the youth studying in Saskatoon.<sup>25</sup>

When JJ required a series of blood transfusions for pernicious anemia, it was several of his young student friends who came forward first to offer their blood.

As a former teacher, JJ also took a keen interest in the Sunday school program. On Sunday mornings, religious classes were held for children and youth at the Victoria School. By March 1931 JJ reported that four classes were meeting regularly: a boys' class of 16, a girls' class of 14, a catechism class of 10 and a Bible class of 15. JJ himself taught the Bible class. He continued his active involvement with the Sunday school for many years, functioning as superintendent even when no longer actively teaching himself. His reason for maintaining control of the Sunday school was, as he put it, "not due to the lack of capable teachers but because I think it important to become acquainted with the children, the future members of our church, as early as possible."<sup>26</sup> JJ made a point of befriending and interacting with the children, not only in the congregation's early years as a small fellowship, but also as it grew into a large and established city church.

The language issue surfaced very early in the Sunday school. Children and young people were learning English in school and therefore experiencing increasing difficulty with the High German language of the



church. In the home most families spoke the familiar Low German. JJ was not averse to the young learning English—he had made it a priority for himself—but he insisted that a strong effort be made to increase knowledge of German so that the youth would not be lost to the church. Consequently, he recommended that special German classes for children from the Sunday school be held on Saturday mornings. He and a woman named Irene Thiessen taught these classes. The promise of a picnic outing to nearby Pike Lake in the spring seems to have provided some incentive for those reluctant to attend. Evidently, the classes bore fruit. Within four years, JJ reported that all children in the Sunday school could read and understand German.<sup>27</sup> This was, however, only the first episode of an ongoing drama on the language issue.

From the start of his ministry, JJ also devoted many hours each week to visiting the sick and dying in Saskatoon's two hospitals and the sanatorium. He always credited his mother with being his teacher in this aspect of his ministry. Initially, he felt very inadequate for the task of bringing comfort to those struggling with illness and possibly facing death, but he was heartened and strengthened by the warm response and gratitude he received from most patients. His normal routine was to arrive at a hospital, inquire at the front desk for all those with "Mennonite" names, take note of the names and room numbers and then, beginning on the top floor and working his way down, stop to see each person on his list.<sup>28</sup> His priority was to visit those individuals who were members or adherents of his congregation, but he also eagerly sought out other Mennonites whose connection to the church might be weak or who were from a rural church and therefore might not expect a visit from their own minister. During the course of his visits, he invariably struck up conversations with non-Mennonite patients as well. Frequently he had opportunity to refresh his Ukrainian and Russian language skills in these encounters.

Over the years JJ developed a particular technique for visitation. In a brief conversation, he would identify a particular problem that a patient was struggling with, whether physical, emotional or spiritual. He would then read a pertinent passage of scripture, sing a hymn or two and close with prayer. Particularly if an individual was facing imminent death, it was critical, in JJ's views, that he or she "make things right" with God. This meant: confessing and repenting of sin, accepting God's grace and forgiveness and surrendering one's life to Christ. It seems that he may have been somewhat overzealous in his efforts to ensure that the dying made it to heaven. On at least one occasion his persistence in assisting a dying man "in the final struggle" was quite annoying to the attending physician and nurses who had procedures to perform.<sup>29</sup> Some people also

may have wondered about the authenticity of some of the “deathbed conversions” that JJ attended. Yet he always regarded them as completely genuine. It brought him much satisfaction if he could help someone die with a heart and soul at peace.

### **Outreach in Pleasant Hill**

Most of the work of the *Mädchenheim* and the congregation took place in the centre of the city where the home and Victoria School were located. But a significant outreach also occurred on the western edge of town in the district that came to be known as Pleasant Hill which was part of Saskatoon’s notorious “west end.” Initially, it had been part of the rural municipality rather than the city proper. Therefore, it attracted folks who could not pay city taxes or meet city housing regulations (which stipulated indoor plumbing). These were, in large measure, people who were unemployed, poorly educated and had few skills. When the city boundaries expanded to include the west end, city officials relaxed the building and health regulations, ensuring that any new homes constructed would continue to be unserviced and of poor quality. Many families in fact lived in garages or shacks without windows, foundations or decent heating. Because the residents had neither knowledge nor ability to pressure the city for improved conditions, the entire district suffered from increasing neglect. The west end was soon known for high levels of poverty, illiteracy and crime.<sup>30</sup>

Among the people that lived in Pleasant Hill were a significant number of Old Colony and Bergthaler Mennonites from the Hague and Rosthern areas. Most of them were “refugees” from the school crisis in the reserve. In the 1920s, the provincial government had resorted to legal action against Old Colony and Bergthaler families who refused to send their children to public schools. Many lost their farms as a result of the stiff fines exacted as penalty for their resistance. A significant number from both groups chose to emigrate to countries promising greater religious freedom, with the Old Colony moving to Mexico in 1924 and the Bergthaler to Paraguay in 1926–1927. A good number remained behind, many of them simply too poor to even consider moving. Quite a number of these people gravitated to Pleasant Hill.<sup>31</sup> As the Depression deepened and the fortunes of farmers collapsed, the numbers swelled.

Aside from the issue of economic impoverishment, many of the Pleasant Hill Mennonites were, as JJ Thiessen described them, “people poor in spirit [and] poor in spiritual nurture.”<sup>32</sup> Without any spiritual leadership to turn to—almost all their ministers had moved to South America—without the necessary cultural and educational resources for living in the city environment, without access to any city or provincial

social assistance, many of them succumbed to a variety of social ills: alcoholism, crime, prostitution and the like.

Beginning in 1928, Benno Toews began a Sunday school in the Pleasant Hill district with the blessing of the *Russländer* Mennonites of Saskatoon. JJ Thiessen assumed leadership of this work when he began his assignment in 1930. Each Sunday afternoon he and one or two recruits from the *Mädchenheim* travelled by street car to the end of the line and then walked a further distance to the Anglican church on the corner of Avenue T and 19th Street where they held Sunday school classes for Pleasant Hill children. Attendance was sporadic since parents did not always provide the necessary encouragement, but participation always improved during the Christmas season. In 1933 the number of children enrolled stood at 59.

In addition to the Sunday school program, JJ began to do home visitation among the families in Pleasant Hill. This was no small feat, given that many folks moved frequently, had no telephones, and he himself had no access to a vehicle. It was not uncommon for him to spend several weeks trying to track down a family, finally to locate them, only for them to move on once again. The visits themselves were challenging for JJ, since they exposed him to levels of great physical, emotional and spiritual need: a bright young daughter forced into prostitution to help the family make ends meet, mothers trying valiantly to care for many offspring while their husbands drank, children growing up in cold, crowded and dirty conditions.

The house calls also provided JJ with some humorous moments. On one visit, he stopped at a home where two fellows were fixing a car. In his usual gregarious way, he struck up a conversation about the car. When he finally took his leave, he apologized, saying to one of the boys, "Henry, you have to excuse me that I ask so many questions." Henry's reply was, "That's okay. Some folks who come here know less than you." Another time JJ arrived at a home with a frozen nose, having walked a considerable distance on a cold winter's day. This home was known for its pungent aromas. On a previous visit, he had encouraged the weary mother to open the windows for some fresh air. This time he didn't notice the smells, but as his nose thawed it became quite itchy and he began to rub it. The poor woman was quite worried that she had offended the Reverend with the smells once again. She quickly ordered her son to open the window, saying, "The air is too heavy for Mr. Thiessen." JJ quickly reassured her that it was not the smells but the frostbite that ailed him. She was most relieved.

The plight of the people at Pleasant Hill was deeply troubling to JJ. On the one hand, he was clearly exasperated by the destructive choices

that some individuals made. When the newspapers reported the crimes committed by Pleasant Hill Mennonites, when the secretary of the Children's Aid Society informed him that the Mennonites were a real problem, and when leading citizens like Dr. Stewart of St. Andrews College claimed that the Pleasant Hill folks put all Mennonites in a bad light, JJ chafed. He was especially annoyed that people who had not darkened the door of a church for years still called themselves Mennonite.<sup>33</sup> But many more times his heart was moved to compassion for people who had suffered too many disappointments and failures. Moreover, as he wrote to David Toews, there were many occasions when it seemed pointless and inappropriate to discuss people's spiritual health if their most immediate concern was the grinding poverty. When he walked into homes where children shivered and went unfed, JJ could hardly address matters of the soul without first arranging that food and fuel be delivered to the home.<sup>34</sup> Charitable funds from the Saskatoon congregation, as well as a number of rural churches, made such donations possible. When the worst of the Depression was over, JJ wrote up a proposal for a rehabilitation project that would see poor Mennonite families from the city trained in new agricultural methods and resettled on farmland. He shared it with the Home Mission Board, hoping that it might take on the task of raising funds for the costly undertaking. He wrote, "Experience teaches us that it is easier to make sacrifices for foreign missions. Certainly we want to meet our responsibilities there, but we cannot neglect nor ignore the challenges God gives us here at home."<sup>35</sup> It seems that his dream remained that—a dream.

If JJ and the folks at First Mennonite hoped that the Mennonites of Pleasant Hill would become integrated into the congregation, they were to be disappointed. There were simply too many obstacles. Some were practical, such as the cost and the difficulty of transportation. Others were cultural. For instance, the people at First Mennonite used High German in worship and Sunday school, while the Pleasant Hill group did not have strong facility in that language. With them JJ used Low German in teaching Sunday school and leading worship and Bible studies. Furthermore, a level of sophistication about the First Mennonite crowd made many of the Pleasant Hill people uncomfortable in their midst: the First Mennonite folks were better educated, sang in four-part harmony, dressed more stylishly, and the women cut and curled their hair.

The ministry by First Mennonite in the Pleasant Hill community continued for many years. During the first 15 years, JJ faithfully made the trip there each Sunday by streetcar or bicycle to preside over the Sunday school and lead worship. In the mid-1940s, his wider church responsibilities increased and others assumed major leadership for the



*For many years, JJ's bicycle was his main mode of transportation. Photo: Patkau, First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon*

Pleasant Hill work. The fruits of their labours were not readily evident. As JJ reflected some years later, "The spiritual soil was often hard, overgrown with thorns and weeds, but often also filled with a deep longing to change and to find a more meaningful life, both physical and spiritual. The seed did not always fall on rocky soil. How much fruit was harvested for Christ in those years only God knows."<sup>36</sup> In the 1950s the Pleasant Hill mission was organized as the independent congregation named Pleasant Hill Mennonite Church. That First Mennonite maintained an active involvement there, especially when its own members struggled under the weight of the Depression, is to its credit.

### **Roles for the Minister and His Family**

JJ's salary from the Home Mission Board and the urban context in which he served set him apart from other Mennonite ministers in Saskatchewan. Few of them were paid for their ministerial duties and most served in rural communities. But in many ways he functioned very much according to a traditional understanding of minister and his role. He was the spiritual leader of the group, having ultimate authority in the areas of worship, Sunday school and *Seelsorge* (care of the soul). He also chaired all meetings of the *Bruderschaft* (meetings of male members of the congregation) and the trustees' committee. He greatly influenced the decisions made in those meetings, whether they dealt with the discipline of a wayward member, the payment of bills or the establishment of a church library. Very little happened within the organized life of the

church which did not have JJ's blessing. In general, it was expected and accepted that ministers would wield considerable authority. So there was nothing particularly unusual about the way he operated at First Mennonite. Nevertheless, it was also true that he grew to bask in the power and authority of the ministerial office and did not always look kindly on challenges to that authority.

One of JJ's endearing qualities was that he had a way of drawing other people into the work of the church and thus giving them a sense of belonging and ownership.<sup>37</sup> He personally recruited individuals to teach Sunday school, to sing in the choir, to join in the outreach efforts in Pleasant Hill (later, Mayfair as well), to lead clubs for the children, and to lead men's and women's groups. Often, he did not ask people whether they wanted to be involved in these programs. He simply informed them of a particular need and told them that this is where they would serve. A few people resented this form of coercion. But many others, it seems, felt honoured that JJ would consider them capable for a task they would not have considered.<sup>38</sup> Years later, many people would credit him for their initial forays into ministry and service.

The ministry has undergone enormous change since the early years of JJ's work in Saskatoon. Today, churches and conferences operate with a very professional understanding of the role of the minister. There are "job" descriptions, policies on vacations and "time off," and structures for ensuring accountability. These things did not exist in JJ's early years. Consequently, there were no boundaries or parameters to his work and no one to keep him from working all his waking hours. David Toews, the person to whom he was immediately responsible, was available for counsel and advice on a whole range of matters, and the two men did communicate frequently. But Toews was so consumed with his work that he could not always offer what JJ needed. In 1937, for example, JJ was ill and the doctor ordered a vacation. He had had little respite from his work for years. The doctor went so far as to write to Toews about "Jack" and his need for rest. Toews' response was,

I was, of course, not aware that Mr. Thiessen needed a holiday so badly because I did not think that the work was particularly strenuous, and he has had days off from his work quite frequently.<sup>39</sup>

The expectations people held of ministers, the demands of the situation and JJ's work ethic translated into a number of important ways that he functioned as a minister. First of all, he could not conceive of a time when he was not "on duty." He was simply always available. If there was work to be done, he would attend to it then and there. If there was

any kind of church function happening—even meetings of the *Frauenverein* (women’s organization)—he would be present. If the hospital called in the middle of the night with an emergency, he would rise, don his clothes, call a taxi and go. If he himself needed hospitalization for some reason (as he did increasingly in later years), he would hold devotions with other patients. If he was “on vacation,” he would take the opportunity to preach in every church he visited along the way. The following paragraph, which appeared in a 1944 report, is illuminating:

During the summer we (Mrs. Thiessen and I) were absent from Saskatoon for a few days in June and July. We considered these our holidays. During this time I spoke in Fiske, Herschel, Springwater, Glidden, Herbert, Glen Kerr, Hanley, Clavet, Waldheim, Dundurn and Sonningdale. On our way to the conference in Winnipeg I had the privilege to speak in Whitewater, Lena, La Salle, Winkler and Springstein. It was a pleasure to meet so many good old friends and to make new acquaintances. It was a real rest and refreshment in spite of the different engagements during our visits and the Conference days.”<sup>40</sup>

In 1935 JJ shared with the *Bruderschaft* the schedule he followed in a typical week.<sup>41</sup> It ran as follows:

Day	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
<i>Monday</i>	Correspondence	City Hospital	Correspondence
<i>Tuesday</i>	Home visits	Bible House Ladies Aid	Bible Hour
<i>Wednesday</i>	Home visits	St. Paul’s Hospital	Bible Hour
<i>Thursday</i>	Sermon preparation	<i>Mädchenheim</i>	<i>Mädchenheim</i>
<i>Friday</i>	Bible study	Home visits	Sunday school or Chr. Endeavour
<i>Saturday</i>	German school	Sanatorium	With family
<i>Sunday</i>	Sunday school	Pleasant Hill	Worship

In addition to these regular responsibilities, JJ also helped young women find employment, officiated at weddings and other special events, and attended numerous conferences and meetings. There were few moments during the day when he was not at work; and his life lacked the balance that would be considered important today.

A second important feature of JJ’s approach to ministry was that he did not make clear distinctions between his work life and his family life. There were both positive and negatives aspects to this interplay. On the positive side, the Thiessen children saw a lot of their father, even though only one evening per week was devoted exclusively to them. He had no

study or office and did all his sermon preparation and letter writing at the dining room table. The children participated in the *Mädchenheim* meetings on Thursdays and accompanied their father to German school and Sunday school, worship services and other church functions. They knew their father and his work very well for his role as minister was fully integrated with his life as father. Moreover, they felt very much a part of the congregation and its life. Women from the *Mädchenheim* became like older sisters and members of the congregation like an extended family.

On the negative side, many times JJ's work, and all that it meant for Tina and the children, intruded into their lives. With a steady stream of guests requiring a meal or an overnight stay, the family was seldom alone. It was not unusual for 12 people to be around the supper table; some weeks Tina fed 30 to 40 extra mouths. Each evening she also hauled benches and blankets from another part of the house to create a make-shift bed for herself and JJ in the kitchen. (The house had only two bedrooms, one for the children and the other for the *Mädchenheim*). When a visiting minister stayed overnight, he was given the "kitchen suite;" JJ and Tina squeezed into JJ's tiny study. Early one morning, thinking her parents were sleeping in their regular place in the kitchen, young Helen jumped into their "bed" with them. To her horror, she discovered that she had landed on Rev. David Toews who had arrived late the previous night.<sup>42</sup> Her siblings did not let her forget that episode.

JJ strongly believed that his family was a mirror of his ministry. If the children somehow did not reflect his values and commitments, his integrity as a minister could be called into question.<sup>43</sup> Family devotions were understood as the most important way of passing on the faith and its expectations for how the children were to live their lives. Hedio, Katie, Helen and Walter were all expected to be at the breakfast table by 7:30 sharp and the supper table by 5:00 for Bible reading and prayers. It was understood that they would participate in all church functions—there was never any question of not going.<sup>44</sup> They were also expected to be on good behaviour, especially when church or *Mädchenheim* meetings were held at the house. The youngest, Walter, was known to lament, "It is hard to be a minister's son."<sup>45</sup> On one occasion, Hedio was upstairs playing a record player she had won while the church trustees were downstairs in the Thiessen living room. When the chorus of "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" wafted through the house, JJ was so offended and embarrassed, he marched upstairs, grabbed the record and broke it over his knee. He then returned to his meeting downstairs.<sup>46</sup> Fortunately, he was not so rigid in his expectations that he totally forbade his children any youthful experimentation. Although their father disapproved, they eventually saw their share of movies and even attended occasional mixed parties.



Dances, however, remained out of bounds, even though traditional Russian Mennonite circle games were acceptable.

This chapter would be incomplete without mention of Tina Thiessen's enormous contribution to the ministry in Saskatoon. Like her efforts on behalf of the *Mädchenheim*, her labours were not always that visible to the wider congregation. But without her support and assistance, JJ's own efforts would not have born fruit in the way they did. Tina extended gracious hospitality to many, many guests. She participated faithfully in the *Frauenverein* and, through the sale of handiwork, helped to raise significant funds for the work of the church. She made pastoral visits when JJ was not available, usually taking with her a pot of soup for the needy family. She decorated bulletins and programs with her artistic designs. She baked thimble-sized bread for communion service from a recipe given her by Margareta Toews, and washed, starched and ironed the white linens used only for this occasion. She also accepted almost all responsibility for running the household, mostly because JJ's work was so all-consuming but also because he was quite helpless in these matters. In addition to typical domestic labours, she mowed the lawn, shovelled the snow, attended to family finances and bookkeeping, and made sure that repairs were looked after. She went about her work with patience, humility and love, not expecting or receiving very much recognition.

### **The Hard Times**

JJ encountered many difficulties in the early years of ministry in Saskatoon. They caused him to comment once again, as he had in Rosthern, "All beginnings are hard." These struggles also served to deepen his reliance on God's grace and provision.

One of the early difficulties was a conflict with a few Mennonite Brethren (MB) individuals. This conflict cast a cloud over the beginnings of JJ's entire assignment. Prior to his arrival in Saskatoon, the people who gathered for worship and for *Jugendverein* included both Mennonite Brethren and General Conference individuals. (Most of those who had been known as *kirchliche* in Russia joined General Conference churches in Canada, and thereafter became known informally as GCs or Conference Mennonites). JJ's appointment by the GC Home Mission Board as leader of the group was interpreted by some MB participants as an affront. A man named H. Siemens wrote a sharply-worded letter to *Mennonitische Rundschau* in April 1931 in which he accused JJ of fomenting division between the GC and MB groups by independently establishing a *Mädchenheim* and assuming leadership of the Victoria School meetings.<sup>47</sup> JJ was deeply hurt by the accusations but chose not to respond. However, two of his parishioners came to his defence in the

May 13 issue of the *Rundschau*, emphasizing that JJ was not acting independently at all but on behalf of the local group and the Home Mission Board which had called him to the two-fold ministry.<sup>48</sup> A few weeks later H. Siemens appeared at JJ's office to apologize for his remarks.

The chronology of events surrounding the formation of a Mennonite Brethren congregation is unclear. Did the MBs begin to meet on their own prior to JJ's arrival or as a result of it?<sup>49</sup> Did the MBs begin their own Thursday evening gatherings with young working women prior to or after the establishment of the GC *Mädchenheim*? How much did JJ's work contribute to the division for which Siemens blamed him? Could David Toews and the Home Mission Board have done more to consult with MB individuals or conference representatives before forging ahead with their plans? Was it inevitable that the Russia-born division between MBs and *kirchliche* be perpetuated on Canadian soil? These questions cannot be answered without further research. What is apparent is that by early 1931, and perhaps even sooner, a separate Mennonite Brethren group was conducting its own Thursday evening meetings with working women and its own Saturday and Sunday evening services in facilities of the First Baptist Church.<sup>50</sup> The joint *Jugendverein* continued for a time, but eventually it divided down conference lines as well.<sup>51</sup>

Evidently some tension between the GC and MB groups in the early years was not easily overcome. When one examines the development of the two congregations during the first decade, it almost appears there was an element of competition between the two—as if neither wished to be outdone by the other. For instance, both congregations were officially organized in January 1932. Both congregations related to a *Mädchenheim* that held Thursday evening meetings. Both congregations were also involved in outreach among the poor, the GCs in Pleasant Hill and the MBs in the Mayfair district of Saskatoon. Each congregation undertook to construct a church building in 1935 and, in the fall of 1936, the two buildings were dedicated just two weeks apart.<sup>52</sup> There was greater cooperation between the two congregations after 1935, when the Mennonite Brethren conference named H.S. Rempel as city missionary in charge of the Saskatoon MB Church. Rempel and JJ became good friends, working together especially in the area of hospital visitation. Once a month they led a joint worship service for patients in the sanatorium and several times a year a communion service.<sup>53</sup> Their friendship helped to heal some of the wounds between the congregations, even though the relationship remained somewhat distant.

A second difficulty for the Thiessens was health concerns that continued to plague JJ and Tina. He had not felt completely well ever since the years in Rosthern and the gruelling schedule he maintained there. In

1931 he consulted a doctor who ordered rest, but JJ did not cooperate. “. . . who can even think of resting when duty calls?” he wrote.<sup>54</sup> At Eastertime 1932 he was overcome with fatigue and faintness while leading a Good Friday service; he finally realized he was very ill. Indeed, believing death was near, he begged God for an additional five years of life. The diagnosis was pernicious anemia, a severe iron deficiency. Initially, JJ improved significantly after two blood transfusions provided by members of his congregation.

Longer-term management of the disease required that he take an expensive medication and eat lots of liver. At \$15 per month, the cost of the medication was prohibitive, especially during the Thirties. The Schellenberg family graciously helped out by paying for the drug from time to time and providing the family with a short vacation at their cottage north of Saskatoon. Fortunately, liver was cheap, so Tina served it frequently, even though some of the children found it very distasteful. But it did its work. JJ regained his health and strength fairly quickly, and his ordination, planned for May 1932, proceeded on schedule. (Eventually, vitamin B12 injections kept his anemia in check.)

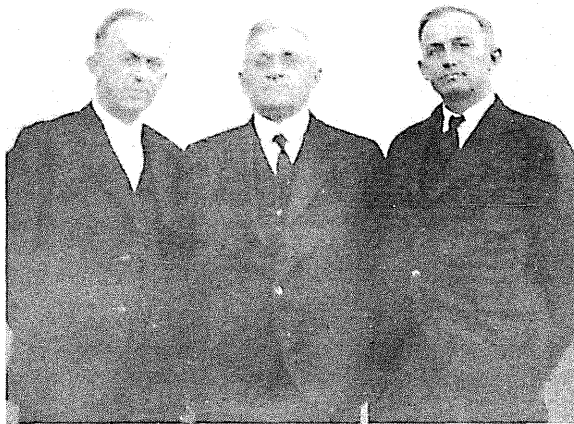
Once again Tina was not so fortunate. In the winter of 1935, she became very run down and her latent tuberculosis flared up. In August she was confined once more to the sanatorium for what was expected to be a few weeks' rest. But the weeks turned into months; it was springtime before she was finally released. JJ and the children missed her terribly during those months. Visits for the whole family were possible but not easy, since “the san” was located on the far western edge of the city and necessitated a long and expensive streetcar ride. JJ and oldest daughter Hedie visited more frequently on their own. On the home front, JJ once again felt it necessary to hire household help to make up for Tina's absence. Even though Hedie and Katie were now 16 and 13, respectively, and able to shoulder many of the household responsibilities, the tasks of hosting guests and preparing for *Mädchenheim* meetings simply demanded extra help. This also meant additional expense at a time the family could not afford it. Tina found the long confinement in the san very difficult as well. She busied herself writing letters, drawing pictures and even creating little story books for her children. She knit, crocheted and embroidered many fine articles in her painstaking way. It was also during her confinement that she acquired fluency in the English language. There was great rejoicing when, on April 5, 1936, she was given a clean bill of health and returned home. In his quarterly report to the Home Mission Board, JJ included these words, “A heavy load has been lifted from our hearts. Our family, in the more narrow and the wider sense, has received new life. Spring has come again. . . .”<sup>55</sup>

Another enormous challenge was the devastating impact of the Depression and the toll it took on the congregation and the Thiessen family. As unemployment skyrocketed, many breadwinners from First Mennonite lost their jobs. At one point more than half the congregation was without work.<sup>56</sup> Women from the *Mädchenheim* also faced a shortage of positions, just as the deteriorating farm situation pushed more of them to the city in search of work. Wages for domestics dropped from \$10 or \$15 a month to as low as \$5. According to the arrangement with the Home Mission Board, members of the congregation and young women who participated in the *Mädchenheim* were responsible to cover the rent for use of the Victoria School and the Thiessen residence. But by 1933 the group could not meet its monthly obligations of \$80.<sup>57</sup>

JJ was fortunate enough to have employment through the difficult decade of the Thirties. However, he too went into deep debt during those years. The Home Mission Board treasury virtually dried up, and consequently all the people on its payroll suffered. In 1933 it was reported to the triennial convention of the General Conference that Mission Board workers had, overall, received only 46 percent of the wages owed them that year.<sup>58</sup> JJ's salary was often months late. It was also reduced from \$100 per month to \$90 and frequently only a portion of it arrived. Except for rent, the salary had to cover all the other expenses incurred by the family for its own purposes or for running the *Mädchenheim*. This included food, telephone, water, electricity and coal, as well as JJ's costly medications. The Thiessens were fortunate that Epp's Grocery Store allowed them to purchase food on credit. (Epps were members at First Mennonite.) But when the bills went unpaid

*For many years JJ's salary was provided by the General Conference Home Mission Board. Here, he poses with J.M. Regier, Home Mission Board representative, and David Toews, "superintendent" of Home Mission Board activity in Canada.*

Photo: MHCA



month after month, JJ's discomfort mounted. As he wrote to David Toews, "It is so terrible when one must always borrow and beg."<sup>59</sup> In the fall of 1932, JJ was forced to go to City Hall to plead that the electricity not be turned off because of an outstanding balance. This was clearly a humiliating experience for him.

According to one historian, JJ never complained about the family's difficult financial circumstances.<sup>60</sup> Although he did not grumble publicly, he certainly did privately, especially to David Toews. As Canadian superintendent for the Home Mission Board, Toews was the recipient of many written complaints. Over the 1930s, JJ wrote letters about the difficulty of trying to make ends meet.<sup>61</sup> In mid-1934 he penned the following paragraph to Toews:

My financial situation, about which I feel compelled to comment, has become unbearable. Rent for the house, electricity and water bills have not been paid for two months. The grocer from whom we buy the necessities of life has become unfriendly. I have no prospects for income and it is evident that I can no longer bear this load. I need medication which has also been bought on credit for the past two months. I know you are not pleased with this situation, but what shall I do? Do you believe the Mission Board intends to let this work lapse. In my reports to them I have never mentioned the financial situation in order not to put the work in jeopardy. But I must say we have no reserves and the credit I previously had at the bank has been discontinued because I couldn't keep my word.<sup>62</sup>

Toews tried to be understanding but it seems that he also grew exasperated with JJ's repeated pleas. Couldn't he understand that the coffers of the Home Mission Board were empty, dependent as they were on donations? Didn't he realize that everyone was suffering just as he was? On one occasion, he informed JJ that he (JJ) had received more of his share than other workers supported by the Home Mission Board, implying that JJ should recognize that other workers were also in great need. Sometimes Toews dipped into other funds at his disposal, for example the Relief Fund of the Board of Colonization, in order to pay JJ his wages. On a couple of occasions, JJ wrote directly to the Home Mission Board office, describing his difficult circumstances. This was a departure from the understood protocol and Toews was upset that JJ took this step.

Somehow the Thiessens managed by keeping their costs to a minimum. Early in the decade JJ purchased a second-hand bicycle for \$20; he paid \$2 down and the balance over nine months.<sup>63</sup> He drove his trusty bicycle around town in all seasons except winter, thereby reducing

the money spent on streetcar fare. A car was simply out of the question. Tina's resourcefulness was an enormous asset on the home front. On a treadle machine she had purchased in Rosthern, she sewed clothing made from bleached flour sacks, carefully embroidering the edges with her artistic flair. She took apart JJ's worn old suit, turned it inside out, and re-stitched it; later it was transformed into a coat for one or more of the children. Friends from rural areas who came to visit or do business in the city, often brought potatoes, eggs and cream to the Thiessens. For a time JJ and Tina even considered moving their family and the *Mädchenheim* to the west end where rent was much cheaper. They did not follow through with this, presumably because the new location would have made the home much less accessible to the working women.

Even though times were tough, neither JJ nor Tina became stingy. They continued to give thanks to God for what provisions they had and to share these with others. As long as it was possible to send relief parcels to relatives in the Soviet Union, they did so, recognizing that the relatives were truly starving. They never turned away someone in need of a meal, including one man who showed up without fail every Saturday noon for years. Another visitor who regularly came to beg was nicknamed "God-Bless You" because that phrase peppered his conversation. Katie grew irritated when her father repeatedly dug into his pockets for some coins for "God Bless You," saying, "He's probably feathering his mattress." JJ's response was, "Child, if he asks for it and doesn't need it, he has a problem; but if he asks and needs it and I don't give it to him, I'll be answerable." Years later, when "God Bless You" died, JJ and Tina were among only eight persons to attend his funeral.<sup>64</sup>

### **First Mennonite Grows and Develops**

Despite the trials of that first decade, the mission work in Saskatoon bore fruit. True, it was not mission work in the sense of outreach to people who were without Mennonite or even Christian roots. The uniqueness of this mission effort was its vision for gathering a scattered, diverse and formerly rural people and helping them build a strong and vibrant faith community in what was still frequently considered foreign territory: the urban environment. Under JJ's leadership the congregation grew. By 1935 its original membership of 34 had increased to 88, mostly through baptism. By 1939 it had reached 129 with Sunday attendance (for both services) ranging between 200 and 250, and 95 children enrolled in six Sunday school classes.<sup>65</sup>

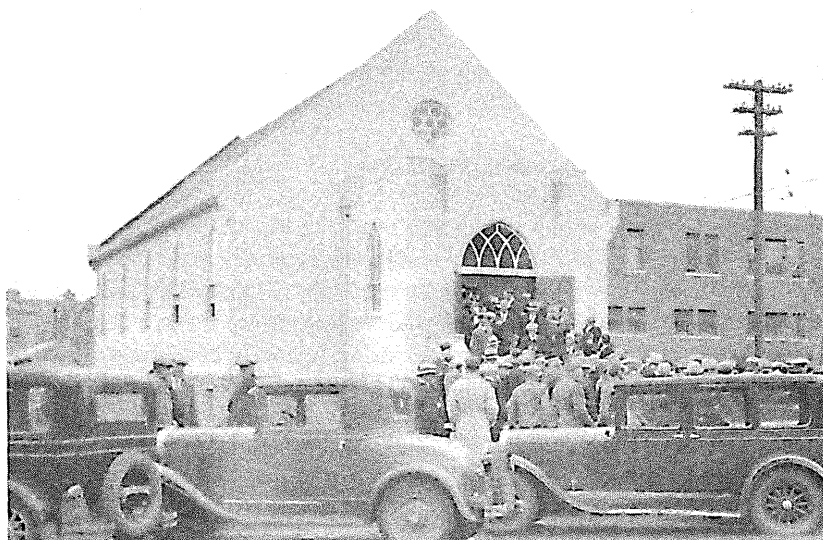
A number of important developments in the last half of the decade gave life to some of JJ's dreams and attested to the congregation's increasing maturity. The first of these was the construction of a church

building. Initial discussions on the topic took place in the spring of 1935, and in October 1936 the building at 123 Fourth Ave. was finally dedicated. Thereafter, all congregational functions took place in the new church building. Despite the fact that the Depression had forced land prices to bargain basement levels and that the Home Mission Board provided a grant of \$5000 and an additional loan of \$1000, it was no small miracle that the building was completed. In a report to the Home Mission Board, JJ wrote:

When I review the situation and realize that our desire to have our own building has become a reality in this time of limited financial resources, then I have the feeling that a miracle has taken place before our eyes.<sup>266</sup>

It was 1944 before the church finally paid off the mortgage on its building.

A second development involved the reorganization of the congregation into First Mennonite Church and the ordination of JJ as its *Ältester*. Since its founding in 1932, the congregation had existed as one of the locals of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church with David Toews as its *Ältester*. Since JJ was an ordained minister but not an elder, he could not



*The Saskatoon congregation dedicated its first church building at 123 Fourth Avenue on October 18, 1936. Photo: MHCA*

preside over baptismal or communion services—Toews had to come from Rosthern to perform those functions. This was becoming increasingly difficult for him because he had too many responsibilities and was showing signs of aging. At a special meeting of the Saskatoon *Bruderschaft* in October 1937, which Toews attended, the revered *Ältester* recommended that Saskatoon organize as an independent congregation and that JJ be ordained as its own *Ältester*. At first there was support for the latter recommendation, but it was not until early in 1938 that the group approved severing its link with the Rosenorter Church and reorganizing itself as First Mennonite Church of Saskatoon.

Initially, JJ had some misgivings about being ordained as *Ältester*. When David Toews first raised the issue with him in early fall of 1937 he shared his indecision, “As yet I do not have clarity about the *Ältesten* question. I waver back and forth. At times I am trusting and at peace; then doubt overcomes me again.”<sup>67</sup> However, he implied that, if the congregation would vote decisively in favour of his ordination, he would accept the decision and trust God for guidance. His ordination and the reorganization of the congregation took place on May 22, 1938.

The final important development during this period was First Mennonite’s hosting of the 1938 sessions of the General Conference Mennonite Church. The triennial convention had never been held outside the United States even though many Canadian congregations were members of the General Conference. JJ was one of the event’s key organizers and was hard at work a full year before it took place. He was the one to locate suitable meeting facilities in the city, to arrange overnight accommodations in homes and hotels, to organize a registration committee and food committee, to help plan the conference program and to write minutes for the meetings. His propensity for organization—and perhaps his own need to be in control—meant that he even concerned himself with the renting of communion glasses, with the menu for the week’s meals and the selections chosen by the choir director.<sup>68</sup> One of the directors was deeply offended when JJ vetoed her choice of “The Holy City” for one of the sessions.<sup>69</sup>

The conference, held July 31 to August 8, 1938 at the Saskatoon exhibition grounds, put First Mennonite Church on the North American Mennonite map. It also gave considerable visibility to JJ. As a result of his involvement with this conference, he developed relationships with a number of key American leaders, the “big shots” as one conference reporter referred to them.<sup>70</sup> He also developed a deeper loyalty to and appreciation for the wider work of the General Conference in foreign missions, education and publication. Some Canadian Mennonites found the “cultural” differences between themselves and Americans disturb-



ing—the Americans used the English language in worship, they sent women as conference delegates and men attended conference sessions in their shirt sleeves. But for JJ these were not barriers to deeper fellowship and closer working relationships with American brothers and sisters, even though he too insisted on keeping on his suit jacket regardless of the summer heat.<sup>71</sup> The fact that JJ was employed and salaried by the General Conference Home Mission Board treasury was certainly a factor influencing his positive predisposition toward the conference.

As the Thirties drew to a close, the Depression finally seemed to be abating. Despite extremely difficult economic circumstances, the work for which JJ had been called to Saskatoon was on solid footing. The congregation was well organized and growing. The *Mädchenheim* was supporting scores of young working women in practical and spiritual ways. Both aspects of the mission work were demonstrating that the faith could persevere even in the secular city environment. At the end of the decade there was reason for optimism. However, the outbreak of World War II in 1939 swiftly brought new and different challenges to the work.

## 1939–1946 The War Years

In September 1939, after months of posturing, Germany suddenly invaded Poland and World War II was launched. Canada followed the example of Great Britain and declared war against Germany on September 11. In Saskatoon, JJ Thiessen penned the following words to his friend David Toews,

It is very regrettable that war has been declared. As is always the case in times of war, in the name of justice, many unjust acts will be committed on the front as well as in the countries themselves. We do not know what awaits us. I think many of us echo the words of the Apostle Paul, "I am afraid"—literally, "*We* are afraid"—"but do not despair." God will see to it that the outcome will be redemptive.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sensitivities about Language**

The very day JJ wrote these words, an incident directly related to the war's outbreak occurred which quickly developed into a major congregational crisis. A.A. Schellenberg (son of A.D. Schellenberg), proprietor of the O.K. Economy grocery store chain and a member of First Mennonite, phoned JJ and explained that he was preparing to dismiss any of his employees who continued to participate in organizations, including churches, which used the German language. Since First Mennonite Church still used German almost exclusively and since many of its members were employed by Schellenberg, the congregation would be directly affected. At Schellenberg's invitation, JJ hurried over to the O.K. Economy office where employees had been summoned to hear the announcement. When all had gathered, Schellenberg informed everyone that the reason for his action was to prevent anticipated acts of harassment or sabotage against his business or family. Employees were given several days to decide whether or not to terminate their involvement with any German organization and remain in O.K. Economy's employ, or to continue their association and face dismissal.<sup>2</sup>

In some ways, Schellenberg had reason to expect harassment from community members. For months prior to the war, anti-German sentiment had been building in Saskatoon, and indeed across Canada.

The local newspaper, the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, reflected and perhaps fostered some of that sentiment. Not that the daily paper painted all German-Canadians with one brush. If it was critical of the Nazi views of Winnipeg-based *Die Deutsche Zeitung* and its supporters, the *Star-Phoenix* also highlighted the loyalty of German groups like the local Concordia club. Nevertheless, simply the amount of attention given to the “German question” no doubt roused concerns among some of the populace.

One particular article seems to have been especially worrisome. On April 25, 1939 the *Star-Phoenix* reported on a meeting of the local Trades and Labour Council where it was revealed that a German Fascist party had the support of numerous voters in districts north of the city, including 35 percent of voters in the Rosthern electoral district.<sup>3</sup> The publication of this article angered Rosthern resident David Toews who felt that it was intended to implicate Mennonites. He wrote a lengthy response which was published on May 6. He denounced the percentages as entirely unfounded and asserted that Mennonites were loyal Canadian citizens. He went on to argue that Mennonites treasured their German language and heritage and need not be ashamed of it. He also explained that if some of his people felt sympathy for Germany, it was because Germany alone had stopped the advance of Bolshevism when other nations had turned a blind eye to Bolshevik atrocities.<sup>4</sup>

Toews probably intended to assuage public fears about Nazi sympathies among the Saskatchewan Valley Mennonites, but evidently A.A. Schellenberg felt Toews’ response made matters worse. Unlike most other members at First Mennonite, Schellenberg had come to Canada as a young teenager in 1913 and was much more “Canadianized.” He had close ties with the Liberal Party and was probably aware of the anti-German sentiments of some of the local members.<sup>5</sup> He most certainly knew that in parts of Canada, some Christian churches were discontinuing their German worship services because of fear of negative repercussions. Sensitive to public suspicion and mistrust, Schellenberg was thus eager to downplay the Mennonites’ German identity and to promote the notion of Dutch descent. (In the wake of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, Mennonites in Russia had gone to extensive lengths to argue that they were of Dutch, rather than German, ancestry.)

It is possible that the language issue had bothered Schellenberg for a number of years already. In 1936, three years before the war started, he wrote a letter to JJ indicating that he would be withdrawing from active membership at First Mennonite because he felt “out of tune with the congregation.”<sup>6</sup> Although Schellenberg was not more explicit, it seems his withdrawal was prompted by the issue of an English Sunday school

class. Early in 1936, JJ had asked the question whether it was time to begin an English class, since some children did not attend the Saturday German classes and therefore could not understand what was being taught on Sunday morning. There was vigorous debate of the issue, with four men present in favour of an English class and eight opposed. It is possible that Schellenberg was one of the four who advocated an English class. Ironically, just a few months after Schellenberg's letter, the class was begun.

Following Schellenberg's actions in September 1939, JJ called a special meeting of the First Mennonite Church *Bruderschaft* for September 10. After a lengthy discussion, the meetings passed a resolution, a portion of which read:

Since neither our government nor the Canadian people have openly indicated any objection to our German worship services, we cannot condone or understand A.A. Schellenberg's course of action as a private citizen in a free land. The brotherhood is of the strong conviction that A.A. Schellenberg with this manoeuvre cannot deny his origin, nor reach the desired result, neither with the government nor with the people. The brotherhood refrains from all retaliation since that would only lead to further misery of the brethren.<sup>7</sup>

The meeting instructed JJ and two other members to meet privately with Schellenberg to encourage him to revise or moderate his position so that church members could attend worship without forfeiting their jobs. Schellenberg responded that he had nothing against the congregation or its beliefs, only its language. He intimated that the government would soon take steps to silence German-speakers, and that ultimately his employees would thank him for looking out for their interests.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of changing the language of worship to English at First Mennonite to accommodate the O.K. Economy workers was not considered an option by either JJ or other members of the congregation. For most people, German remained the language of their faith and they could not conceive of worshipping in any other way. Neither was it suggested that persons employed by O.K. Economy Stores forfeit their jobs in order to continue participating in church. After the long hard years of the Depression, which were still not completely over, jobs were simply too precious. The congregation thus experienced a terrible loss. A total of 47 persons, including six single adults and ten families with 21 children, were absent from worship and Sunday school. This group included two Sunday school teachers, the choir director and one of the trustees. Their absence was felt keenly. Monthly offerings also dropped by at least 20 dollars.

The crisis was extremely difficult for JJ. Schellenberg was a good friend who had helped the Thiessen family on many occasions. Through the entire episode, JJ tried to remain on good terms with him. At one point David Toews solicited JJ's counsel on a strongly worded letter which he intended to send to Schellenberg. JJ refused to pass the letter on to Schellenberg, saying the tone was too harsh. He wrote, "A voice continually reminds me, 'Overcome evil with good;' 'Bless those who persecute you.'"

JJ also felt deeply for the people affected by Schellenberg's order. He visited all of them in their homes, where he saw their tears and heard their laments. Many were experiencing intense conscience pangs, having to choose between their source of livelihood and the public expression of their faith. JJ felt they had been done a grave injustice. Nevertheless, he remained philosophical, writing to David Toews, "I know obstacles are put in our way so we can overcome them; trials come so we learn to stand the test. My prayer is that we emerge from this experience enlightened. Like a storm-tossed tree sinks its roots ever deeper, so I, together with the congregation, hope to become more firmly rooted in the love of God in Christ Jesus."<sup>9</sup> On the Sunday following these events, JJ chose as the text of his sermon, John 16:33: "In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"

As it turned out, Schellenberg's order was rescinded some weeks later, quite possibly as a result of Prime Minister Mackenzie King's public statement that the vast majority of German-speaking Canadians were loyal citizens. The affected individuals and families were able to return to church. In the intervening time, some of them had tried to honour the order *and* their own consciences by standing outside the church windows on Sunday mornings, listening to the worship service and leaving their offerings at the door.<sup>10</sup> Some members of the Schellenberg family, however, chose to distance themselves further from the congregation and any German identity. A. A. terminated his membership in the church in 1939 and his brother Jacob in 1940. Early in 1940 A.A., Jacob and a third brother, Henry, changed their last name to Shelly and the name of the family business to Shelly Brothers. A notice printed in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* informed customers that the family's roots were in Holland and, just prior to their migration to Canada from Russia, they had owned a Dutch windmill.<sup>11</sup> The father, A.D. Schellenberg, and two other sons, who also were shareholders in the business, remained active members of the church and retained the name Schellenberg.

First Mennonite Church continued to use mostly German in its worship services, Sunday school classes and *Jugendverein* throughout the war. On a number of occasions JJ noted with gratitude that at no time had

there been any pressure exerted by different levels of government that it do otherwise. However, the congregation did make a few concessions in the interest of public opinion. First of all, the annual *Sängerfest* (song festival) was cancelled. Each spring for many years, First Mennonite had hosted a large song festival involving many choirs from the surrounding communities. The event was held largely in German and had in the past attracted public attention. In the context of the war and the heightened sensitivities in the community, it was deemed best not to hold the festival. The *Sängerfest* resumed toward the war's end. In other Saskatchewan communities, Mennonite churches discontinued their German schools for a time, and the Rosthern German-English Academy became, simply, the Rosthern Academy.

### **Alternative Service and Military Service**

The matter of language was the most immediate way that the repercussions of war reached into the life of J.J. Thiessen and First Mennonite Church. But the issue of alternative and military service for young men in the congregation soon followed. In order to understand the complexities of this issue, some background information is necessary.

The various Mennonite groups in Canada had arrived at different times, in different circumstances, and had been given different assurances regarding their request for military exemption. This variance now created significant difficulties. The Mennonites of Swiss-German origin (primarily in Ontario), who had begun to arrive in Canada from the United States after 1786, had been promised exemption from active military service but not from alternative or noncombatant service or payment of special taxes in lieu of military service. However, the specific type of service required during wartime had never been clearly identified. *Kanadier* Mennonite immigrants of the 1870s (primarily in southern Manitoba) had been promised that they would receive an “entire exemption” from military service. This was backed by a special 1873 Order-in-Council. The *Kanadier* interpreted this as an exemption from any form of state service whatsoever, including alternative service. And indeed, this is how the Canadian government interpreted the order during World War I. The most recent immigrants, *Russländer* of the 1920s, however, had been informed at the time of their arrival that during wartime they would be expected to do something in lieu of active military duty, either noncombatant or alternative service. They were satisfied with this arrangement. They had become familiar with alternative service in Russia—both *Forsteidienst* and *Sanitätsdienst*—and felt that it enabled them to serve their country in a way that was consistent with their faith. It also helped to mitigate public criticism for their refusal to bear arms.



*Participants in the 1947 Saskatchewan Mennonite Song Festival. The annual event was discontinued during the war years because of sensitivities over Mennonite use of the German language. Photo: Patkau, First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon*

Even before the outbreak of war, it was clear that Canadian Mennonites were not united on what they were prepared to do if military conscription was enacted. “Those covered by the 1873 Order-in-Council claimed exemption from all state service, even in time of war. The descendants of the earlier Mennonite migrations were willing to render some form of alternative service if it were entirely non-military, while those who had arrived in the 1920s were willing to render a much broader range of services, including medical and ambulance work at the front.”<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, the various positions could not be reconciled and, after it became clear that conscription would be enacted, there was a break between the leaders of the Manitoba *kanadier* churches and those leaders representing other Mennonite groups. Thereafter, one committee, named the *Ältestenkomitee*, spoke for the interests of the Manitoba *kanadier* churches and another one served all the other Mennonites in Canada. The latter committee was really a coalition between the Western Service Committee led by David Toews of the Conference Mennonites and B.B. Janz of the Mennonite Brethren, and the Ontario Conference of Historic Peace Churches (CHPC) which included all Ontario Mennonites, the Brethren in Christ and the Quakers and was led by S.F. Coffman. Late in 1940, the government finally confirmed the fears of Manitoba *kanadier* groups and determined that alternative service would be required of all approved conscientious objectors.

The process by which young Mennonite men applied for conscientious objector (CO) status and were assigned to alternative service positions was very complex and goes beyond the scope of this story. But in very general terms, there were several important steps. The first was participation in a national registration which took place in August 1940. Most Mennonite men, though not all, complied. (At this point, there was still confusion as to whether there would be special concessions for Mennonites covered by the 1873 Order-in-Council, so not all Mennonites felt they needed to register.) Thereafter, young men were called to appear individually before a divisional registrar of the National War Services Board and demonstrate that they be granted conscientious objector status. If an individual was successful—in Saskatchewan this was no small matter—he was awarded indefinite postponement of active military service and was assigned to some form of alternative service. Postponements were also granted to individuals who were not COs but who were employed in what were considered essential industries. Some Mennonites received postponements as farmers rather than as COs.

Beginning in the summer of 1941, when alternative work camps were finally ready, conscientious objectors were assigned to work in road



construction, forestry and firefighting. In 1943 the alternative service program was expanded so that COs could help to mitigate labour shortages in agriculture and certain industries. Men working in this capacity received \$25 a month and turned over all other earnings to the Red Cross. In September of that year, the government also allowed COs to enlist in a noncombatant role in the medical and dental corps. There they were not required to bear arms, but they wore military uniforms, served in regular military units and were under military supervision. This was a very controversial form of service. Many Mennonites believed that its close association with the Armed Forces made it an unacceptable option. Others felt it provided a greater opportunity for COs to “bind the wounds” of war and to share in the sacrifices that regular soldiers were required to make.

Across Canada 7543 Mennonite men chose alternative service and approximately 4500 enlisted for active military duty. The fact that 60 percent of Mennonite men chose alternative service was a sign that the Mennonite commitment to nonresistance had not been forgotten. At the same time, a 40 percent active enlistment rate was a definite signal that, as far as the church went, something was amiss. A variety of explanations have been offered regarding the rather high level of enlistment. Some people felt that ministers had been negligent in preaching and teaching nonresistance and that young men had not been well prepared.<sup>13</sup> Others, not nearly all, were unhappy with the form that alternative service took.



*Young Mennonite men at the alternative service camp at Candle Lake, Saskatchewan. Their winter jackets were a gift from the Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan. Photo: Patkau, First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon*

As one historian has put it, “Hiding in the woods and doing forestry work at a time of national emergency seemed to many sincere and dedicated Mennonites a very poor way for Christians to give witness to their faith. Many yearned for constructive wartime work that was as dangerous and as demanding as the destructive work of war.”<sup>14</sup> A more recent interpretation points to the common understanding and social construct of masculinity and what it meant to be a “real man.” Conscientious objectors and alternative service workers often were perceived, by the wider society and thus by themselves, as “yellow-bellied cowards.” Enlisting in the military gave men a sense that they were meeting society’s expectations about maleness.<sup>15</sup>

When the war ended, those men who had served in alternative service were welcomed back into their home churches. Many moved into leadership positions in their congregations. Those who had chosen active military duty frequently faced a different kind of reception. According to T.D. Regehr, most churches took the position that these men had violated one of the church’s most cherished beliefs and, unless they were prepared to repent for their transgressions, they could no longer be considered members.<sup>16</sup> Only a few churches developed a “strategy of reconciliation” with returning soldiers, many of whom did not return to their home congregations. Some of them had been baptized and established formal membership in churches previously; others had not been baptized prior to their enlistment. Many never did join Mennonite churches.

### **JJ and the Service Question**

What role did JJ play in making alternative service arrangements? How did he feel about these arrangements? How did he nurture a commitment to nonresistance in his own congregation? How did he relate to those from his church who performed alternative service and those who enlisted? What factors influenced the position he took toward both groups?

He was not part of the inner circle of Mennonites leaders who deliberated amongst themselves and negotiated with government for the establishment of an alternative service program. Nevertheless, as a close confidante of David Toews, who was at the helm of those negotiations, JJ was a well-informed and keen observer of events as they unfolded. He also hosted a number of important meetings on alternative and military service questions. Since 1936, when it built its own building, First Mennonite frequently became the central meeting place when ministers from various parts of the province gathered. During the war, the church’s role expanded to include the hosting of regional meetings that drew representatives from the four western provinces. As someone who thrived

on these gatherings and who could lead them with efficiency and diplomacy, JJ frequently found himself in the role of chairperson or as secretary.

He valued harmony within the church and strove to foster unity where he could. He was greatly disappointed when the Manitoba *kanadier* withdrew from the coalition negotiating alternative service with the federal government. This occurred just after an important meeting held in October 1940 in Saskatoon. JJ was also very upset when his friend and former co-worker in Russia, B.B. Janz, nearly destroyed the fragile unity of those groups remaining within the coalition. Janz's misdemeanour was that he appeared independently before government officials to explore the possibility of noncombatant medical service under military control when a special coalition delegation had clearly stated that such a form of service was unacceptable.<sup>17</sup> JJ personally favoured a form of noncombatant service, as did Janz, but he knew that such an option was not acceptable to other Mennonite groups. As far as he was concerned, the critical times required as united a voice as possible.

Many young men at First Mennonite Church were confronted with having to choose between a form of alternative service and active military service. They had varying relationships with the congregation. Some were young men who had grown up, been baptized and become members of the church. Others had attended Sunday school and participated in church but had, for whatever reasons, not chosen baptism, at least not yet. Still others were university students who lived in Saskatoon and worshipped at First Mennonite but had roots and perhaps membership in a rural church or even outside the province. Because of their different circumstances and relationships with First Mennonite, it is difficult if not impossible to determine how many men from the congregation chose alternative service and how many enlisted.

JJ related warmly and positively to those fellows who opted for alternative service. His personal correspondence contains copies of many letters written to COs. In his letters, he thanked the young men for remaining true to the "faith of the fathers," assured them of the prayers and support of the congregation, and offered words of encouragement for times of loneliness and discouragement.<sup>18</sup>

JJ took a special interest in students at the University of Saskatchewan who were faced with a unique dilemma. According to regulations governing the National War Services Board, students enrolled in recognized educational institutions could receive postponements, providing they participated in obligatory military drills on campus and they signed a form waiving all claims as Mennonites, Doukhobors or COs for the duration of the war. This posed a problem for Mennonite

students enrolled at the university who were committed to remaining true to the faith. They could continue their studies only if they signed the waiver and participated in the drills. If they were not prepared to do either, they had to put their studies on hold and perform alternative service of some form. University studies and conscientious objection thus became incompatible.<sup>19</sup>

JJ's first direct encounter with the dilemma of university students occurred in the spring of 1942. Henry Friesen, a young university student from Eyebrow, had signed the waiver and participated in the military drills. He had been worshipping and attending catechism classes at First Mennonite and, in April 1942, requested baptism. At this point his participation in the drills became an issue. He was quick to point out that there were baptized church members who had enlisted for active service so he could not see a problem with his request. JJ wrote to David Toews and asked for counsel on how to handle the situation. Toews was evasive. A month later JJ wrote again, asking in a more general way, how to deal with the question of obligatory drills. At that time he encouraged Toews to call a ministers' meeting so that "we might find a course which we could follow with a clear conscience."<sup>20</sup> The outcome of this discussion is unclear. For whatever reasons, Henry Friesen was not among the young people who was baptized that spring.

By the spring of 1942 it became clear that any students wishing to uphold the church's position on non-participation in war (and therefore military drills) could not continue their studies. Some Mennonites accepted this situation and resigned themselves to camp work. Others willingly signed the waiver, participated in the military exercises and pursued their studies. A third group of young men decided to challenge what they believed was a grave injustice. They evidently had JJ's support for this protest. He added his signature to those of three students requesting an interview with Saskatchewan's registrar for the National War Services Board so that the matter could be discussed. Unfortunately, a record of the interview was not located. However, it is clear that the leader of the students, Cornelius Reimer, was most appreciative of JJ's advocacy on their behalf. Some months later, Reimer wrote to JJ, "On the merits of the way you handled the above situation alone, I should have felt duty bound to write you a letter prior to this—leave alone everything else."<sup>21</sup>

The students' motivation was not selfish. "Our purpose is not to hide in the University," they wrote in a special appeal to the Prime Minister.<sup>22</sup> They were prepared to perform alternative service, but felt that they could better serve their country with a completed university education than they could by interrupting those studies to build roads, plant trees and fight

forest fires. They indicated their eagerness to serve in a noncombatant medical capacity (this provision had not yet been made).

JJ was sympathetic to the predicament faced by the students, indeed, all young men of military age. Despite his support for and encouragement of those who chose camp service and despite his own choice of *Forstendienst* over *Sanitätsdienst* in World War I, he could understand the desire of many fellows to do more to witness to their faith, on the one hand, and to demonstrate their loyalty to Canada on the other hand. Service in the camps seemed a rather inadequate vehicle for either. In early January 1943, JJ's quarterly report to the General Conference Home Mission Board noted that, in the absence of a noncombatant option for COs, a significant number of young men from First Mennonite Church were opting for active military service.<sup>23</sup> The matter-of-fact tone with which JJ reported this suggests that he was not at all surprised by their choice.

How did JJ relate to those young men who chose to enlist? The incompleteness of his correspondence and First Mennonite's church records precludes a definitive statement. However, what evidence is available suggests that he continued to relate to enlisted men as a pastor and friend. He welcomed their presence in church, even though some church members were greatly distressed to see military uniforms at their worship service. He prayed for them publicly, as he did for the COs. He invited them over for Sunday lunch. In a couple of cases he organized farewell gatherings for fellows being sent overseas. He wrote warm and pastoral letters to Mennonite men in the Armed Forces, reminding them of the fundamentals of the faith but not condemning them for choosing a path that digressed from the church's teaching.<sup>24</sup>

Late in the war, JJ had occasion to make a trip to British Columbia where he tracked down Abram Braun, now known as Roy Brown, who was serving as a private there. During their brief visit, Brown was surprised that JJ did not challenge him for his decision to enlist.<sup>25</sup> JJ also encouraged a man named I.G. Neufeld, formerly from Saskatchewan but by then in Toronto, for taking it upon himself to act as an unofficial chaplain to Mennonite enlistees serving at Camp Borden and other military installations in southern Ontario. It was JJ's view that the church was not doing enough to stay in touch with men who had enlisted in the Armed Forces.<sup>26</sup>

While JJ continued to relate in a warm and encouraging manner to Mennonite men who enlisted, in one situation he may have acted less compassionately. This case involved a young woman named Helena Kasdorf from the town of Osler who had come to Saskatoon in the late 1930s and worked as a domestic servant for a Mr. and Mrs. Hansen. She had participated in the *Mädchenheim* and been baptized and received into

First Mennonite Church in 1940. Eager to broaden her horizons, Helena joined the Air Force in 1942 and quickly attained the rank of corporal. While stationed in Ontario, she corresponded with JJ.<sup>27</sup> On a number of occasions she enclosed small donations for the church with her letters. In 1944 her name was taken off the membership list of First Mennonite Church.

Exactly how Helena's name came to be removed from the membership registry is somewhat of a mystery. According to some of her family members, JJ simply wrote to Helena informing her that she could no longer be considered a member because of her enrollment in the Air Force.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, such a letter has not come to light, and minutes of the *Bruderschaft* or the Trustees Committee, where issues of church discipline were sometimes discussed, are incomplete for the war years. If JJ did in fact act in the alleged manner, his actions represented a departure from how he dealt with cases of men who joined the Armed Forces. But double standards for men and women were common, and it may have seemed much more abhorrent for a woman to join the military than a man, particularly since there was no conscription of women. At the same time, there may have been other factors influencing the removal of Helena's name from the First Mennonite church membership list.

In general, JJ seems to have taken a more conciliatory approach to the fellows from his congregation who joined the military than many other ministers did. He did not condemn them or the choice they had made. What were the factors influencing this predisposition? Firstly, JJ was committed to treating people as individuals. The same principle that guided his dealings with students in Russia or women of the *Mädchenheim*—"to individualize and not to generalize"—informed his relations with young men facing the draft. Whereas some ministers were swift to categorize young men as either among the "faithful" (those who chose alternative service) or the "unfaithful" (those who opted for military duty), JJ regarded them all as individuals. In his view, each person had a unique story, perspective and motivation. This approach prevented him from "writing off" those young men who enlisted.

JJ was also someone who could recognize and live with complexity and ambiguity. He acknowledged that at times life's choices between good and evil were not clear. He knew that the alternative service camps provided a state-accepted way for Mennonites to remain true to the faith, but he also felt those camps fell far short of providing opportunities for true Christian service. And he was fully cognizant that the motives of those in the camps were not necessarily on a higher plane than those who chose the military. A letter he sent to the parents of an Alberta boy who opted for the Armed Forces conveys this best:

I am truly convinced that we have excellent men with solid Mennonite-Christian convictions in the C.O. camps. Regretfully, I recognize that there also may be those who have no Christian convictions. Some in active service serve with a clear conscience because they do not have or do not want the faith of their fathers. Others serve with a heavy conscience because they have different convictions. Somehow they allowed themselves to be influenced or manoeuvred into joining and now cannot change the situation. Some of these young men will not find their way back to our church while others will return reformed, purified. The Lord will give the church wisdom and grace to receive them in the right way. God grant it!<sup>29</sup>

Other factors probably figured into JJ's reluctance to rebuke those who enlisted. For instance, there was the *Selbstschutz* issue. Among the members of First Mennonite Church were a few men who had served in the *Selbstschutz* in Russia during the Revolution.<sup>30</sup> Some of their sons now served in the Canadian Armed Forces. While the contexts were dramatically different, the choices made by those who opted to bear arms were not dissimilar. JJ's reticence on the military issue may have been motivated by sensitivity to—or perhaps fear of—the reactions of those *Selbstschutz* veterans. Or he may have been concerned about conveying an inconsistent witness and message. How could the church take the younger men to task for taking up arms when similar choices by their fathers had not undergone similar scrutiny.

There was also a very personal element in all of this. In 1943, JJ and Tina's 22-year-old daughter Hedio announced her engagement to Vic Loewen. The son of long-standing members of the congregation, Vic had grown up at First Mennonite, participated in Sunday school and *Jugendverein* and, in 1940, been baptized, along with Hedio. His parents, John and Katherine, were close friends of the Thiessens. Mrs. Loewen had in fact taught some of the Thiessen children piano lessons. Vic was known for his good looks and charm. In many ways, it seemed like an ideal marriage. The only problem was that in 1942, when called up from his teaching post, Vic had chosen to join the Air Force rather than go to alternative service camp.

JJ's correspondence reveals little of his feelings about his daughter marrying a man in the Air Force. In a short letter to David Toews he simply announced the engagement and the fact that Vic was currently assigned to an Air Force office in Regina.<sup>31</sup> But it was painful to him that his daughter would choose to marry someone who had gone against the faith. It was especially hurtful when Vic appeared for the wedding—a ceremony which JJ was to perform—in his Air Force uniform. Yet he did not stand in the way of the marriage nor attempt to dissuade Hedio from



*Hedio Thiessen and Victor Loewen on their wedding day, March 1943.*

her decision. At First Mennonite there was considerable “talk” about all of this. A number of families who desired a more principled stance were very upset that JJ allowed the marriage, and they remained cool toward the family for some time.<sup>32</sup>

The service question was undoubtedly a sensitive one at First Mennonite, as it was in other congregations. Perhaps this is why JJ chose not to address the topic explicitly in his war-time sermons. A complete set of sermons for the 1939–1946 period is not available, but of the substantial number that remains, there is no specific reference to the Mennonite position on nonresistance and how enlistment in the military contravened that position. JJ’s admonitions include general calls for Christian love in the midst of war, but that is all. Of course, there could be other explanations for what seems like a glaring omission on JJ’s part. First of all, his sermons and the emphases contained therein could be a



reflection of his own pietist-oriented education. His studies in Russia had not provided him with a comprehensive Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and the centrality of certain Anabaptist distinctives such as nonresistance. Secondly, JJ may have chosen to address nonresistance and non-participation in war in the context of a catechism class or discussion group rather than the Sunday sermon. One of the things he did early in the war was to start a special Sunday evening discussion for young people “to increase their knowledge of Mennonite history, to deepen their religious life and to strengthen their sense of belonging.”<sup>33</sup> Even so, one can only wonder why he did not use the pulpit to expound on what was supposedly a central tenet of the faith. There is some evidence that at the conclusion of the war and in the years immediately following, he was more explicit in his exhortations on the Mennonite refusal to bear arms.

JJ’s somewhat ambiguous position on the church’s historic teachings on military service—at least that is how it seemed to some people—had its strengths and its weaknesses. On the one hand, his concern for individuals and for relationships meant that he did not alienate young people as much as a minister who was motivated more by maintaining certain standards of belief and behaviour. Although he might disagree with some young men and their choices, he could remain their pastor and their friend. In addition, his ability to understand and empathize with a variety of points of view meant that he could be flexible, could live with compromise and could act in a mediating role in various instances.

These same qualities, however, also had their negative side. For some people, JJ’s concern to maintain good relations with others made him appear soft on principles. His response to Hedio’s marriage to Vic was a case in point. How could a minister in a pacifist denomination allow his daughter to marry an Air Force man, they wondered. In addition, JJ’s flexibility made him seem inconsistent and unclear on certain key issues. At times people accused him of agreeing with whomever he happened to be speaking to at the moment. His optimism also sometimes prevented him from recognizing serious problems.

In 1941 First Mennonite church printed a copy of its constitution. The preamble began with a statement of basic beliefs and included a reference to nonresistance: “It is contrary to the Word of God to participate in war of any form.” Some years after the war, the constitution was revised and the following sentence was added, “Anyone who accepts active service by such act excludes himself from the church.”<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, we do not have detailed information as to the circumstances and the discussions related to this revision nor how JJ felt about it. Evidently a majority of the First Mennonite *Bruderschaft*, however, felt that the church needed to take a stronger position on the military service question.

### Relief Work

The issues of language and alternative or military service were two important ways that the tentacles of war, fought on distant lands and shores, reached into the life of JJ, his family and First Mennonite Church. A third way was the response of the First Mennonite community to the suffering of war through the provision of relief for war victims.

From its beginning, the congregation had raised money for the unfortunate, both near and far, primarily through the women of the *Frauenverein* and the working women of the *Mädchenheim*. By the creation and sale of handiwork, they had raised money for Christmas presents for needy children of the Pleasant Hill Sunday school, gifts for patients at the sanatorium and relief assistance for suffering co-religionists in the Soviet Union. Incidentally, their efforts had gone a long way toward paying for the First Mennonite Church building constructed in 1936.<sup>35</sup> As news of the war's devastation reached Saskatoon, the women set themselves the task of alleviating new needs.

Mennonites had long recognized that if they could not participate in waging war, their faith nevertheless demanded a compassionate and healing response to the devastation of war. For the people of First Mennonite, their own experience of war's trauma in Russia now made them eager to help other war victims. They also recognized that helping to relieve war's suffering was, simply put, good public relations. At a time when Mennonites were often criticized for not doing enough to serve their country, relief assistance was a useful way to demonstrate that they were doing something. David Toews phrased it this way:

In organizing for relief work, we believe it is our Christian duty to relieve suffering. Besides this, however, we believe that we act wisely not to arouse the hostility of the Canadian people as would be the case if we did not do anything.<sup>36</sup>

JJ was keenly aware of this dynamic and did not hesitate to draw attention to Mennonite relief efforts. Early in 1940 he was interviewed by the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* in connection with a case involving a conscientious objector. While he insisted that Mennonites were averse to fighting, he emphasized that they were willing to help their country in other ways and referred to plans to establish a home in England for children being evacuated from London.<sup>37</sup> At war's end he again welcomed the opportunity to use the media to update the wider community on Mennonite relief contributions.

Among the Mennonite church leadership across Canada, there was a strong sense that Mennonites needed their own relief committee through which they could avoid supporting organizations that were rather closely

tied in with the war effort. They also would have a way of documenting and giving visibility to Mennonite contributions to relief. In December 1939 David Toews attended a meeting convened by Ontario Mennonite leaders for the purpose of discussing the formation of a Mennonite relief committee. At that time it was decided that the Ontario Mennonites would breathe new life into the Non-Resistant Relief Organization (NRRO) formed in World War I but rather dormant through the 1930s, and the western Mennonites would create a new committee. These two groups would join to support specific projects of Mennonite Central Committee based in Akron, Pennsylvania.

David Toews returned from Ontario with a plan. A meeting was to be convened in each of the four western provinces to which representatives of all Mennonite groups would be invited. Each gathering would form its own provincial relief committee as well as elect two persons to serve on an inter-province committee. Saskatchewan's meeting was held on January 12, 1940 at First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon where David Toews and J.J. Thiessen were elected to serve as the province's representatives on the regional committee. The formation of the Mennonite Central Relief Committee (MCRC), as the new body became known, was formalized in March at a meeting in Winnipeg. A three-person executive was elected, consisting of David Toews as chairperson, B.B. Janz as vice-chairperson and C.F. Klassen as secretary-treasurer. (Ironically, though women had been involved in grassroots fundraising for relief for years, it was the male leaders who assumed the organizational control.) The following month, Toews and Klassen and representatives of the NRRO travelled to Chicago where they confirmed that the Canadian committees would provide financial support for MCC's efforts to house war evacuees in England.

Like B.B. Janz, Klassen was a friend of JJ's from the days when he had been involved in emigration work in Russia. At that time, Klassen had worked for the organization representing the interests of Mennonites outside Ukraine or southern Russia. Based in Moscow, Klassen and his family were among the fortunate few who managed to escape Russia in 1929 before the doors to further emigration slammed shut. Upon his arrival in Canada he had settled in Winnipeg where he was active in the MB Church. Since 1930 he had been employed as the chief *Reiseschuld* collector for the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. In the years following the war, JJ and CF would work together closely on relief and immigration issues. Their relationship was not always free of tension.

Thus by the spring of 1940 the organizational machinery had been established whereby Canadian Mennonites could contribute to distinctly Mennonite efforts to relieve the suffering of war. This was the case

despite the fact that an active Saskatchewan chapter of MCRC did not really emerge until war's end. JJ tried to convene a number of provincial relief meetings in the summer of 1940, but they fizzled out. As it turned out, the relief effort functioned without a provincial-level committee. MCRC treasurer C.F. Klassen kept the newspapers *Der Bote* and *Menno-nitische Rundschau* informed of needs, and the churches and women's groups responded by forwarding their monies and material goods to him. Klassen in turn sent them on to the treasurer of the NRRO in Ontario, who made arrangements for their delivery to England. According to the MCRC record books, First Mennonite made its first contribution of \$15 on April 19, 1940 and continued with fairly regular contributions thereafter.<sup>38</sup> During 1940 the MCRC raised \$9000 for European relief.

With the war's end, Mennonite Central Committee initiated a massive relief, reconstruction and refugee resettlement program in Europe and partner organizations like the MCRC stepped up their levels of support. In 1944 MCC established a Canadian office in Kitchener, Ontario. In the fall of 1945, C.J. Rempel, manager of this office, made a trip west to report on the tremendous needs and to encourage the western Mennonites to increase their giving. As a result of a public meeting with Rempel in Saskatoon, a provincial relief committee, a chapter of the Mennonite Central Relief Committee, was finally established which included representatives of GC, MB, (Old) Mennonite, Brethren in Christ, Old Colony and Bergthaler groups. JJ was the one who called and hosted the meeting, and he was elected chairperson of the new committee. The first initiative was a big meat and vegetable canning project.

The fact that such a diverse group of Mennonites could join together in support of the MCC relief program was no small feat. No doubt, the tremendous need in Europe was one factor that enabled these groups to put aside their differences, at least for a time. Another factor was probably JJ's leadership. Even though he was a *Russländer*—this was problematic for some groups—he managed to gain the trust of many people. A member of the Old Colony church at Hague recalled that JJ and another man visited their village of Neuanlage to encourage Old Colony participation in the meat canning effort. The people in attendance were offended that JJ's companion opened the meeting with a very formal High German devotional. However, when JJ stepped up to the podium to deliver the main presentation, he switched into the familiar Low German. The people appreciated this and evidently committed themselves to work extra hard to deliver the needed meat.<sup>39</sup>

The canning drive was a big undertaking. All the meat and vegetables were donated and canned by rural Mennonites in their communities. The jars were then packed into crates at North Park School in Saskatoon

where JJ had arranged for the use of space. He was present when a reporter from the *Star-Phoenix* appeared at the school to gather information for a story. JJ happily reported that the country churches had canned 43,000 quarts of meat and vegetables, and had also donated 1200 pounds of dried beans, 600 pounds of canned beans and 1000 pounds of home-made soap. Donated flour and clothing were also part of the shipment.<sup>40</sup>

### **Additional Responsibilities**

JJ's ordination as *Ältester* of First Mennonite Church in 1938 was an acknowledgement by his congregation and the wider church of his leadership gifts. In the years following, he was increasingly called upon to exercise those gifts beyond the city of Saskatoon. In 1939, for instance, the *Ältester* of the Ebenfelder Mennonite Church at Herschel died unexpectedly and JJ was requested to assist that congregation, but just for an interim period. However, in 1940 the Ebenfelder Church officially elected him as its *Ältester*; he served in this capacity until 1944. This required that he perform all baptismal and communion services (a minimum of three services per year) at five different locals, as well as lead meetings of the Ebenfelder *Bruderschaft*. Between 1940 and 1948, he also served as *Ältester* of the Nordheimer Church at Dundurn; this involved services at three locals. For a time he also acted as *Ältester* at North Star Mennonite Church at Drake. His responsibilities at each of these places ended when he ordained local ministers as *Ältesten*. In his 1944 report to First Mennonite Church, JJ indicated that because of these extra responsibilities, he had preached 35 times outside Saskatoon. However, he had been absent from his own congregation only five Sundays.

Making an excursion to Herschel, Dundurn or Drake to serve one of the congregations was no quick and simple matter in the 1940s. Without a car, JJ had to rely on the train or the bus or someone who could drive him the two-hour distance. Visits invariably involved staying overnight somewhere with friends, sometimes more than one night. In the spring of 1943, for example, he was scheduled to perform the annual Pentecost ritual of baptism in Herschel. The baptism was planned for a Sunday evening, presumably because JJ could not be there in the morning. On the appointed Sunday, he and Tina took the afternoon bus to Rosetown where they were picked up and driven the rest of the way. Even as they arrived, it was raining heavily and the roads became so treacherous that the service had to be postponed. Hence, the baptism was held on Monday evening. JJ and Tina stayed on an additional night so that he could officiate at the communion service on Tuesday evening. They finally returned to Saskatoon on Wednesday. One of the young people baptized by JJ on that occasion was Jake Wiens, a future son-in-law.<sup>41</sup>

In 1943 JJ was elected chairperson of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC). Since his arrival in Canada, he had taken a keen interest in the workings of the conference. He had attended every annual session except the one in 1938 when last-minute preparations for hosting the General Conference sessions in Saskatoon kept him from the CMC meetings in Eigenheim. He had also been a member of several conference committees. Beginning in 1933 he had served continuously on the Sunday school and *Jugendverein* committee. The following year he had started a lengthy stint on the program committee which determined the agenda for the annual conference sessions; therefore it was a powerful position. In 1941, at JJ's encouragement, the conference had established a committee to explore the establishment of a Bible college, and he had been named as chairperson. Also in 1941 and again in 1942 he was elected as vice-chair to serve along with Benjamin Ewert, who replaced David Toews as chairperson in 1941. In 1943 JJ himself accepted the position of chairperson, a role he would fill continuously until 1959.

He assumed the leadership of CMC at a time when tensions within the conference over the military exemption issue were fairly high. The large Bergthaler Church of Manitoba, one of the founding CMC groups, in fact withdrew its support from both the Ontario-Western coalition negotiating alternative service and the Mennonite Central Relief Committee and joined ranks with other Manitoba *kanadier* groups including the Sommerfelder, Chortitzer and Old Colony. CMC played a central role in both the coalition and the relief committee with David Toews, former CMC chairperson, leading both bodies. That the Bergthaler Church did not also pull out of CMC was quite amazing. Historian T.D. Regehr attributes this to the influence of Bergthaler *Ältester* David Schulz who initially believed that the government would honour the 1873 Order-in-Council and would continue to afford complete exemption to Mennonite men covered by it (including men in his church). Therefore he took issue with many of his CMC colleagues who were eager to offer alternative service even before it was demanded of them. But that was not enough reason to withdraw from CMC itself.<sup>42</sup>

In many ways JJ's commitment to church unity and his skill in charting a course of moderation can be credited for preventing a major split within the conference. Within CMC there was a wide range of views on the alternative service question. One end of the spectrum was occupied by the Bergthaler. At the other end were people like Ontario *Ältester* Jakob H. Janzen, who favoured noncombatant medical service, even if it was under military supervision. JJ was drawn to the noncombatant option, but was prepared to compromise to maintain as united a voice as possible. At a special meeting in Winnipeg in the spring of

1941, when B.B. Janz and others raised the question of pursuing a non-combatant alternative service, JJ cautioned against further antagonizing the *kanadier* groups.<sup>43</sup> For him, avoiding a complete break with the Bergthaler group was of greater importance than the negotiation of a noncombatant service option. At war's end CMC delegates passed a resolution stating that noncombatant service, because it fell under military supervision and prevented COs from forming their own units, would not be an acceptable form of alternative service in the future.

It is quite possible that JJ also provided a voice of moderation when some ministers wished to take a firm stance toward those men who enlisted in active military duty. During the 1942 CMC annual sessions, one delegate suggested that those who enlisted should automatically lose their church membership. JJ clearly did not support such a position. Whether or not he spoke up during the discussion of this is unclear. However, it is significant that in his 1945 conference sermon, he acknowledged the deaths of those Mennonites who had died in battle and stated, "We weep with those who weep." Moreover, a resolution regarding the church's stand on military enlistees, approved at the CMC sessions in 1946, clearly reflected his mediating influence. Although it called Mennonite veterans to confession and repentance, it also stated, "We do not want to be too hard on our young men for we are well aware that much of the blame can be placed with the congregations. Therefore, let us all repent and beg God for forgiveness. We are jointly at fault and responsible."<sup>44</sup>

In the late 1940s and 1950s there would be other instances where strong disagreements would threaten the unity of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and further examples of JJ's concern to maintain unity. These will be explored in Chapter 9.

### **The Home Front**

The end of a decade-long drought and the stimulus of the war coincided to bring about better economic times for the people of Saskatoon and for the Thiessen family during the 1940s. The year 1937 witnessed the most devastating of crop failures yet by 1940 good weather and better prices gave farmers a new sense of hope. Between 1939 and 1945 the price of wheat rose from 57 cents to \$1.64 per bushel. War demands for animal and dairy products, as well as a wider variety of grains, helped to diversify an economy that had become too reliant on wheat. All this was good for the farmers as well as the city of Saskatoon. The city also benefitted economically from the fact that the University of Saskatchewan became a centre for the Commonwealth Air Training Plan which brought young people from throughout the Commonwealth to the

Saskatoon area for training as military pilots. During the Depression, Saskatoon's population had dropped; by 1942 it had recovered to its 1931 level of 43,000.<sup>45</sup>

It was during the war that the Thiessens were finally able to pay off the debts that had been accumulating since their arrival in Saskatoon, debts which had risen as a result of reductions and delays in the payment of JJ's salary. In addition, an amount of \$45 to \$50 per month, which the church had until 1936 or so contributed to cover the costs of rent and fuel, was now diverted to the General Conference Home Mission Board to pay off the church building loan. By 1940, JJ's salary had been raised and was once again arriving regularly, but an accumulated debt of \$400 still weighed on his mind. In January 1943, he reluctantly and apologetically shared this information with the Home Mission Board secretary, once again slighting David Toews.<sup>46</sup> Some time later the Home Mission Board came through with a special cheque to help JJ finally pay off the last of his obligations. He gratefully wrote to the Home Mission Board,

It is hard for me to find words to express my gratitude for this sympathetic consideration of my circumstances by the Home Mission Board. Great joy filled my heart as the last obligation was paid. Never since 1930 have I been without debts. . . . Now the debts are paid and we are in the position to live on our cheque. Thank you all a million times.<sup>47</sup>

In 1941, even before the debts were paid, the Thiessen family moved to a larger dwelling at 443 Third Avenue North. In some ways it was difficult for Tina and the children to leave the crowded house that had been their home for a decade—so many memories were housed within its walls. But the new house had definite advantages. For the first time, JJ and Tina had a real bedroom of their own. He often remarked on what a luxury this room was. There were four bedrooms on the second floor, enough for the children, the *Mädchenheim* and other guests, and a good-sized study on the main floor. The house also possessed an icebox and electric stove. A refrigerator would wait until the 1950s.

The larger home and its amenities made the work of the *Mädchenheim* much easier, especially for Tina. Ironically, soon after the Thiessens occupied the new house, the number of young women moving to the city to look for work dropped off dramatically. As young fellows went off to alternative service camps or military training, their sisters were needed to help run the family farm. Increasingly, young women also found work in factories and offices rather than in domestic situations. There they "lived out," that is, in their own apartments where they could entertain friends and had less need for a meeting place like the *Mädchenheim*. By





*The Thiessens and the Mädchenheim moved to this house at 443 Third Avenue North in November 1941.*

1943 the number of women involved in the *Mädchenheim* had dropped from over 100 to approximately 25.<sup>48</sup> In 1944 JJ speculated that after the war there would be a new influx of women to the city, and “the home will have its proper place.”<sup>49</sup> His predictions would prove correct.

Better times also meant that the Thiessen family could purchase new clothes instead of relying totally on Tina to recycle the old ones. At Christmas 1941 JJ instructed Tina that she should buy a new dress for herself at the Hudson Bay Store. The price should not be less than eight nor more than ten dollars. It was the first brand new dress that Tina had worn in a very long time.<sup>50</sup> JJ also replaced his worn old black Sunday suit with a new one which was reserved for Sundays and special services like weddings and funerals; the old one was relegated to everyday use. Rare indeed were the days when he did not don a white shirt, suit and tie.

A number of important family events and transitions took place in the early 1940s. In September 1942 JJ and Tina celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with a special commemoration at the church. David Toews and fellow *Ältester*, J. Nickel, spoke at the worship service. This was followed by a meal in the church basement prepared by Tina’s friends from the *Frauenverein* and a more informal time of sharing and reminiscing. JJ concluded the event by reflecting back on 25 years of marriage, on the uncertainty that lay before Tina and himself as newly-weds, on the “troubled times” of revolution and civil war, on the tragic death of their son Jacob and the difficult beginnings in Canada. Despite the hardships, JJ could affirm the wondrous and lavish gift of God’s grace through those years.<sup>51</sup>

Hedie graduated from high school in 1938 and Katie in 1941. Hedie took a number of bookkeeping jobs prior to her marriage to Vic Loewen

in 1943. A year after the wedding, she gave birth to Victor Richard, JJ and Tina's first grandchild. Because husband Vic was posted to an Air Force office in Regina, Hedio and "young Vic," as the baby became known, lived with JJ and Tina for a time. For several months the young family relocated to New Brunswick while Vic served as a coastal navigator.

Daughter Katie, known as "the studious one," enrolled at the University of Saskatchewan in preparation for a teaching career. Helen and Walter continued their high school studies. Helen loved to read and always seemed to "have her nose in a book," even while attending to food on the stove or some other household chore. Walter was demonstrating that he, more than any of his siblings, had his mother's musical gifts. Unlike many high-school aged boys, he spent many hours each day at the piano.

Both JJ and Tina enjoyed better health during these years as well. In 1943 JJ had 20 teeth removed and dentures fitted. For years he had taken hydrochloric acid orally because of a stomach acid deficiency, and the enamel on his teeth had worn away. While he waited for his mouth to heal and the dentures to be prepared, he rested and caught up on work in his office. He wrote in a note to David Toews that he needed to absent himself from the pulpit and to invite preachers from elsewhere to come and serve his congregation.<sup>52</sup> For an extrovert like JJ—someone used to preaching at least weekly, leading meetings almost daily and carrying on regular visitation—he found this temporary disability quite a challenge. Fortunately for him, this period of "silence" was short-lived.

The deaths of several close friends during the war years were deeply troubling to JJ and Tina. One of these was Maria or "Mika" Lepp who died very suddenly of a stroke in the midst of a church function in the spring of 1943. "Mika" was the 44-year-old wife of church trustee D.A. Lepp and a very close friend of Tina. Her funeral was not the first one at which JJ officiated, but it was the first held at First Mennonite Church. Mika was a dearly loved member and her death came as a tremendous blow to the congregation. For JJ, even more tragic was the death of his mentor and former colleague from Tiegenghagen, D.H. Koop. Koop was at that time *Ältester* of the Vineland United Mennonite Church in Vineland, Ontario. He committed suicide in the spring of 1944 after a long period of depression. The circumstances of Koop's death were terribly shocking to JJ and, upon receiving the news, he poured out his agony to a friend as follows, "I could not hide my agitation. The blood in my veins seemed to stop flowing and my heart was near breaking. It was too much, too terrible a deed, too unbelievable, and yet there it was in black and white. How could I believe that my dear friend of 32 years,



*JJ & Tina ca. 1946.*

to whom I owed so much, who was one of the most solid characters among us, would take such a step?"<sup>53</sup> Koop's death troubled JJ for a long time.

In 1945 six years of war finally drew to a close. Few people, however, believed that life would resume the rhythms of pre-war existence. The world was a different place than it had been in 1939, and there was no turning back. The most significant portent of change for JJ Thiessen was David Toews' failing health. For decades Toews had been the undisputed leader of western Canadian Mennonites. The Toews' era was now drawing to a close. The implications of this for JJ would be enormous.

## 8

1946–1955

### International Involvements

#### “For the Family of Faith”

In February 1947 JJ’s longtime friend and mentor, David Toews, died. His physical health had been declining for a number of years. Kidney trouble, diabetes and hearing loss had taken their toll. The death of Toews’ wife Margareta in 1941 had also sapped him of emotional energy. He knew that his life was drawing to a close and, over a period of several years, he had resigned from his many board and committee responsibilities. He also resigned as *Ältester* of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church and was succeeded there by John G. Rempel, an instructor at the Rosthern Bible School. Toews had given many years of dedicated service to the Mennonite people of Canada, and there was sadness as this esteemed man of God relinquished the reins of leadership. Even so, for some people Toews’ resignations did not come soon enough.

JJ’s relationship with David Toews was complex and multi-layered. Initially, while JJ worked at the Board of Colonization, Toews had been his supervisor. This supervisory relationship was replicated in the Rosenorter Church (Toews was *Ältester* and JJ a minister until 1938 when he was ordained as *Ältester* himself) and in the Saskatoon mission work (Toews was Canadian superintendent of the GC Home Mission Board and JJ was a mission worker). At the same time, they became very close friends—their different roles and levels of responsibility did not prevent them from treating one another as peers. Despite the fact that they saw each other frequently, they carried on a vast correspondence with several letters going back and forth between Rosthern and Saskatoon each week. In all his letters, JJ addressed Toews with the familiar “Du” pronoun, rather than the more formal “Sie.” And as the years went by, JJ increasingly became the one Toews relied on for assistance. At various meetings, JJ would sit at Toews’ side, explaining things that Toews could not understand, prodding him along in his chairing, attending to his needs. In a number of cases, he also acted as Toews’ travelling companion. From time to time there had been minor conflicts between the two men, but they were able to resolve these in a generous and forgiving manner.

As Toews withdrew from public service, JJ, in his early fifties, assumed many of his responsibilities. Although his list of committee memberships was not identical to Toews' it was remarkably similar. Like Toews, he became chairperson of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and chairperson of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. He was elected vice-chair of the Mennonite Central Relief Committee (Toews had been chairperson) and became a member of the General Conference Foreign Mission Board (Toews had served on the GC Home Mission Board). In 1947 JJ also began many years of service on the Mennonite Central Committee Executive Committee. As former teachers, both men had a passion for the education of Mennonite youth. Toews had lodged his interest on Rosthern Junior College; JJ's focused on Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg.

The scope and magnitude of JJ's wider church involvements, particularly in the decade after the war, are too great to be adequately dealt with in one chapter. For this reason, two chapters are devoted to the 1946 to 1955 period. The current chapter deals with those involvements having an international focus: the rescue of post-war refugees, foreign missions, relief and development, and assistance for Mennonites in South America. It essentially describes JJ's work with the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, the Mennonite Central Relief Committee, Mennonite Central Committee and the General Conference Mission Board. The chapter following is devoted to his wider church activities within Canada.

### **Leadership of the Board of Colonization**

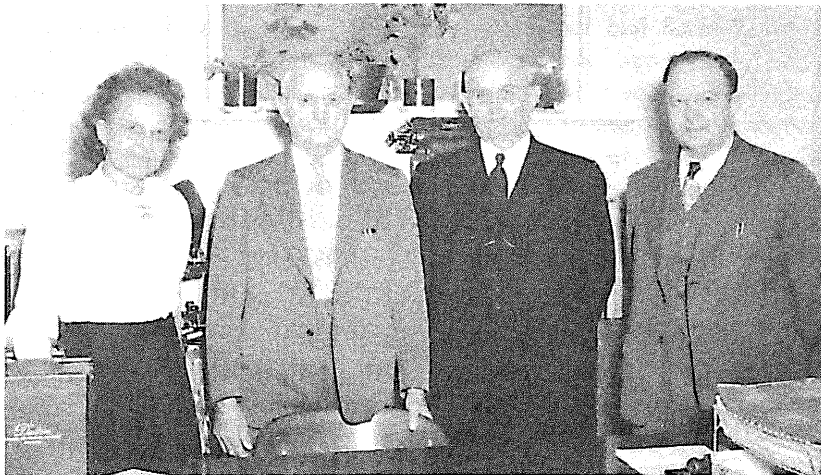
Few people were surprised when JJ stepped into David Toews' shoes. In many ways his "succession" was expected. JJ's leadership skills were well known among Canadian Mennonites, except perhaps among the Swiss Mennonites of Ontario. His familiarity with and love for Mennonite institutions, his confidence and ease in the public realm, his gifts for tact and diplomacy, and his amazing memory, especially for names—these were all assets that suited him for his new role as leader in the wider church. But there can be no doubt that JJ's close association with David Toews also positioned him to take on that role.

Not everyone was happy with JJ assuming leadership, especially of the work of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (Board). A.A. Friesen, who had worked for the Board in the 1920s until a falling out with Toews, felt it required a leader with administrative and practical expertise, not another pastor. C.F. Klassen thought that the position of chairperson should go to B.B. Janz. Nevertheless, JJ energetically applied himself to the leadership of the Board. Immediately following his

election as chairperson, he began to make weekly trips to the Board office in Rosthern. Fifteen years previously, he had commuted weekly from Rosthern to Saskatoon; now he found himself commuting from Saskatoon to Rosthern one or two days each week. His co-workers at the Board were Katie Hooge, Abram Hooge and Daniel P. Enns, all of whom he had worked with years before. Enns died suddenly in June 1946 and was replaced by Jacob Gerbrandt. In the summer of 1947 the Board office and the three employees relocated to Saskatoon as well.

Several pressing priorities faced the Board of Colonization in 1946, the most critical being the plight of Russian Mennonite refugees in Europe. During the latter years of the war, many thousands of Mennonites had escaped the Soviet Union and made their way to western Europe. They urgently needed a new home. The Board hoped to bring this new generation of Mennonite refugees to Canada. However, before it could undertake a new refugee resettlement program, complete payment of the *Reiseschuld* had to be completed.

This burdensome debt owed to the Canadian Pacific Railway dated back to the immigration of the 1920s. A total indebtedness of nearly \$2 million had been incurred and in 1945 more than a quarter million was still outstanding. Foremost among the many reasons that the debt had not yet been fully paid was the Depression which made repayment too tough for most folks. Secondly, a number of immigrants, though a minority, had simply refused to cooperate and meet their obligations. JJ had encoun-



*J.J. Thiessen with other staff of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization in 1946: Katie Hooge, office secretary; Jacob Gerbrandt, secretary treasurer; and Abram P. Hooge. Photo: MHCA*

tered several individuals like this. Thirdly, many of the debtors had already died so their debts were simply absorbed by the organization. Finally, in mid-1945 C.F. Klassen, chief *Reiseschuld* collector for the Board, had been commissioned by Mennonite Central Committee to go to Europe to gather information on Mennonite refugees and to recommend a course of action. Klassen's initial six-week trip grew to four months, and the collection process suffered, at least until his reports of the needs in Europe began to reach the Canadian Mennonite church papers. Thiessen, not yet in the role of chair, was most annoyed that Klassen had not cleared his absence sufficiently with the Board.<sup>1</sup>

Under JJ's leadership, the Board of Colonization launched a new appeal to the Russian Mennonite constituency in Canada to complete the payment. In his mind, before the organization could enter any new credit arrangement for assisting new refugees, it was essential that the old obligations to the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) be met. He shared with a special meeting in Saskatoon,

The matter is urgent. Our brothers and sisters are stranded in Poland, Russia and Germany. The call for help may come soon. Will we have enough credit to help? Who wants to be responsible for the demise of our brothers and sisters in the faith?<sup>2</sup>

The Board set as its goal the final liquidation of the debt by completion of harvest in 1946.

The long-awaited day arrived in November 1946. A total of \$1,947,398.68 had finally been repaid, representing a principal of \$1,767,398.68 and interest of \$180,000.<sup>3</sup> (Eventually the CPR agreed to make available the \$180,000 paid in interest as financing for later refugee transportation costs.) On November 19, JJ delivered the news to his ailing friend David Toews who was in hospital in Saskatoon. Initially, Toews was skeptical but, when JJ insisted that the debt had indeed been paid in full, Toews broke down and wept. He had borne the burden of the unpaid *Reiseschuld* as a heavy weight for many years. He died peacefully just two months later.

### **Resettlement of Postwar Refugees**

With the *Reiseschuld* paid off, the Board could focus its energies on the new refugee crisis. JJ had a very personal interest in this new rescue effort—some of his family members were among the displaced persons in Europe. In mid-1945 soon after the war ended, he had received a letter from his brother-in-law Jacob A. Neufeld, husband of his younger sister Helena. For over a decade he had not heard from Neufeld nor any of his other relatives in Russia. Occasional letters from his siblings had trickled

out until 1934 or so; all of them told of devastating famine and hinted of increasing repression. Eventually the letters stopped completely, leaving JJ and Tina to fear the worst.

During the war they learned that thousands of Mennonite refugees from Russia had made their way to Germany. The forces of the Third Reich, in their dramatic eastward push, had occupied southern Russia in 1941. Then in 1943 Soviet forces gained the upper hand and the Germans made a hasty retreat. Some 35,000 Mennonites evacuated with them. These refugees consisted primarily of women, children and elderly men—younger and able-bodied men had long since been arrested and sent into exile. The refugees made their exhausting and extremely dangerous trek on foot from southern Russia to occupied Poland in the cold and bitter winter. In 1944 Soviet forces advanced on Poland and proceeded to kill, rape and terrorize these “traitors.” Many of the Mennonite refugees were rounded up and repatriated to the Soviet Union where they faced a perilous and uncertain future. It is estimated that some 22,000 were forcibly sent back. Those fortunate enough to escape, including Helena and Jacob Neufeld and several other of JJ’s relatives, scattered throughout Germany in a desperate search for safety and survival. In 1945, with the surrender of Germany to the Allied Forces, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) began a concerted effort to locate these refugees, register them, reunite them with family members and resettle them.

JJ was overjoyed to receive the letter from Jacob Neufeld and to re-establish contact with a part of his family. But he grieved deeply to learn what had become of his loved ones over the years.<sup>4</sup> All three of his brothers, Johann, Gerhard and Abram, had been arrested and exiled to slave labour camps in 1937 or 1938. Johann and Gerhard were presumed dead; Abram’s whereabouts were unknown. In 1941, the Soviets had rounded up all remaining Mennonite men and boys over the age of 15 in Molotschna, including the husbands of JJ’s sisters Sarah, Margareta and Mariechen, four nephews and the husbands of several nieces. These men were also believed dead. Neufeld had also been arrested in the late 1930s. He was among the fortunate ones to be released, but the years of hard labour had left him with a crippling disability. At the time Neufeld wrote his letter, he did not know the current whereabouts of surviving family members. JJ’s two sisters, Sarah and Margareta, and sister-in-law, Helena (wife of JJ’s oldest brother Johann), and their respective remaining children, had all been part of the great trek to Germany in 1943–1944. Along the way, however, the family units had been separated, and Neufeld did not know if they were elsewhere in Germany or had been repatriated to the Soviet Union.



The fate of his family members moved JJ greatly. Since his arrival in Canada nearly 20 years earlier, there had been many moments when he had longed to exchange places with his brothers and sisters. At the height of the Soviet famine in the early 1930s, he had written, “How much easier it would be if seven were here and only one there, but now the situation is reversed. I am alone in Canada and they are all there—without food.”<sup>5</sup> But JJ was not one to be paralyzed by grief nor to dwell on what might have been. Rather, he was galvanized into action. The rescue of his family and of other Russian Mennonite refugees became a personal mission for him, as it had been for David Toews.

### **Obstacles to Overcome**

The biggest obstacle preventing another mass movement of Mennonite refugees to Canada was Canadian immigration law. Since the early 1930s the regulations governing eligibility and admissibility had become increasingly restrictive and, as the Depression deepened, were interpreted in an increasingly narrow way for everyone, not only for Mennonites. Until 1946, essentially four classes of people could gain admittance: British subjects with means, American citizens with means, agriculturalists with means, and the wives (or fiancés) and non-adult children of men resident in Canada. Immigration policy was geared toward reinforcing an Anglo-Canadian norm and preventing entry to people that were at odds with that norm. One analysis describes the years 1930–1945 as the “blackest cloud in Canadian migration history.”<sup>6</sup>

The response of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization to the obstacle of Canadian policy was to do what it had done in 1922, namely, visit Ottawa to lobby on behalf of Mennonite refugees desiring entry into Canada. In July 1946, JJ, together with Board secretary Jacob Gerbrandt, made the first of numerous trips to the nation’s capital to encourage government officials to widen the door. On this occasion they delivered a petition to the office of Prime Minister Mackenzie King, urging the government to broaden its categories of admissible relatives. Over the next decade JJ would make this journey by train two or three times each year. Over time, his generalized appeals shifted to more specific kinds of cases: for example, unwed mothers,<sup>7</sup> persons with medical problems or men with a history of service in the German military.

In his work with the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization on behalf of Mennonite refugees, JJ related to numerous people outside the Mennonite world, many of them persons in high public offices. Immigration work was the one major sphere of involvement that drew him outside the sub-culture of church and faith community within which he operated most of the time. Initially, he worked closely with A.L. Joliffe,

Director of the Immigration Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources and his staff. After 1950, when the government created a Department of Citizenship and Immigration, he became well acquainted with Walter E. Harris, its first minister, and his successor, Jack Pickersgill. In addition, he corresponded with a host of deputy ministers and other officials. The immigration work also necessitated close relationships with CPR officials, especially T.O.F Herzer of Winnipeg, manager of the CPR's Canada Colonization Association, and H.C.P. Cresswell of Montreal, chief commissioner of the CPR's Department of Immigration and Colonization. Herzer was instrumental in the establishment and leadership of the Canadian Christian Council for the Resettlement of Refugees (CCCR). The latter body was formed in 1947 by a number of Canadian church organizations in order to facilitate the immigration of ethnic Germans. Although Mennonite Central Committee had made the case that Russian Mennonites were not of German but of Dutch ethnic origin, it was unclear at the time whether this argument would be acceptable to the International Refugee Organization (IRO), the United Nations body authorized to protect and resettle refugees, excluding Germans. Representing the Board of Colonization on CCCR, JJ worked alongside Catholic, Lutheran and Baptist leaders.

He quite enjoyed moving in government, CPR and ecumenical circles. He possessed a healthy ego and felt as confident and self-assured in the offices of cabinet ministers or senior transportation officials as he did in the homes of his parishioners. From time to time he apologized for his "poor" command of English, but he need not have. More than one government official was amazed that he spoke the language as well as he did, given that he had learned it in his thirties.<sup>8</sup> JJ considered a number of these colleagues his personal friends. He had a warm regard for Immigration Minister Walter Harris, who frequently called upon him to open their meetings with prayer. He also developed long-standing friendships with CPR men, Herzer and Cresswell. From time to time both of them attended meetings of the Board of Colonization in Saskatoon and on occasion ate meals in the Thiessen home. When Herzer died in 1958, JJ made the trip to Winnipeg to attend his funeral and to serve as pallbearer.

In the decade following the war, the Canadian government took deliberate steps to lift some of the restrictions preventing many would-be immigrants from entering Canada.<sup>9</sup> In May 1946 an Order-in-Council extended the definition of admissible relatives significantly. Then in January 1947, six months after JJ and Jacob Gerbrandt's initial visit to Ottawa, another Order-in-Council added several new categories to the list of admissible persons. Under the Close Relatives and Special Projects

scheme, even more relatives, as well as persons with guaranteed jobs in farming, mining and forestry, were allowed entry. This scheme was eventually extended to include domestic workers. In 1949 a new program called the Farm Labour Movement admitted additional agricultural labourers. In 1950 the government lifted its ban against the immigration of persons with German citizenship; the following year it revoked a similar ban against some of those who had participated in the military forces of the Third Reich. All of these changes in immigration regulations enabled many displaced Mennonites to make a new home in Canada, although for many others the changes came too late.

It does not appear that either JJ or other members of the Board of Colonization were concerned about broader immigration issues affecting groups other than Mennonites. It was not for them to advocate on behalf of people not yet found favourable in the Canadian public eye. The concern of JJ and the Board were the *Glaubensgenossen* (co-religionists)—those of the family of faith. JJ was fond of quoting from Galatians 6:10: “. . . let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” He firmly believed that the Mennonite church was first and foremost called to alleviate the suffering of those within the flock, then to reach out beyond. Not that JJ had extra time to ponder the broader humanitarian issues of Canadian immigration policy. He was stretched to capacity simply by looking out for the needs of fellow Mennonites.

#### **“Let us not grow weary”**

If Canadian immigration regulations proved one hindrance to another mass migration of Mennonite refugees to Canada, another obstacle was the Board’s perception that MCC was not doing everything in its power to facilitate a move to Canada. Following C.F. Klassen’s trip to Europe in 1945, MCC had invested significant resources into its refugee assistance program there. Klassen had been assigned as director of the total refugee program, and several other Canadians had also joined the MCC staff. Among them were Elfrieda Klassen Dyck, a sister of CF, and her husband, Peter, from Laird, Saskatchewan. Canada was the preferred destination for most refugees. But with Canada’s strict regulations on admissibility, at least until 1948, with doors to the United States firmly shut, and still-present danger of repatriation to the USSR, MCC had begun to explore other places of refuge. Paraguay, in addition to Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina, held some promise, and was willing to accept Mennonite refugees almost immediately. In January 1947 the first of several huge transports, including 2300 refugees, left for Paraguay. Other groups followed later. Eventually, many more of the displaced Mennonites made a new home in South America than in Canada.

The Board of Colonization took a number of steps that it hoped would expedite more refugees coming to Canada. First of all, it offered some financial incentives to C.F. Klassen in the hope that he would expend more effort on the Board's behalf. Initially, the Board supplemented Klassen's MCC salary. Later, it cancelled a \$5000 debt he owed. The Board also appointed Cornelius J. Dyck, a brother to Peter, as its representative in Europe. Harold S. Bender, secretary for the MCC Executive Committee, did not take too kindly to this latter initiative, since it contravened the agreement that the Board would attend to immigration matters on the Canadian side, while MCC would take responsibility for work on the European side.<sup>10</sup> A compromise between the organizations was reached by MCC appointing C.J. Dyck as its own representative.

In early summer 1948, the Board and MCC also sent JJ to Europe for a five-week period to provide spiritual counsel to refugees and refugee workers, and also to do what he could to get things moving. From late May until the end of June, he criss-crossed Europe with C.F. Klassen, visiting the offices of the IRO, Canadian consulates and shipping companies, and also spending time in eight different refugee camps. Travelling in Klassen's shiny black Mercedes Benz—considered rather ostentatious by some of the refugees and refugee workers—they covered over 12,000 kilometres. In the various immigration offices, JJ wore the hat of Board of Colonization administrator, urging that more be done to move the thousands of refugees longing to come to Canada. In the camps, his role was more that of pastor. Besides preaching and leading worship, he spent much time listening to, praying with and encouraging anxious and discouraged individuals and families. Along the way, he met people he had known in Russia, as well as relatives of friends and acquaintances back in Canada. He also experienced a poignant reunion with some of his own kin whom he had not seen since his departure from Russia 22 years previously. Moments shared with family members were bittersweet as he heard once again of the agonizing losses his loved ones had suffered.

During the course of his trip, JJ learned that there were other reasons than MCC priorities for the slow movement of refugees to Canada. One was a dispute within the IRO as to whether Mennonites from the Soviet Union were bona fide refugees or whether they were in fact German nationals and therefore outside the IRO's jurisdiction. (Many Russian Mennonites had taken out German citizenship after arriving in Germany during the war, so as not to have to return to the Soviet Union after the war.) Eventually, the IRO ruled in the Mennonites' favour, but not before a long and heated debate. A second reason for the delay was a logistical one: lack of available ships and a shortage of Canadian personnel for processing the refugees. When JJ returned home in late June, he was



*During his June 1948 trip to Europe, JJ was reunited with his sister and brother-in-law Helena and Jacob A. Neufeld and their daughter Erika, as well as niece Rita Ruppel and her husband Willie Hambrook. This photo was taken at the Fallingbostel refugee camp.*

hopeful that the situation would improve. He was right. Even by that time, 12 ships were docked at various European ports, prepared to transport an average of 600 immigrants each. By the end of the year, 3828 Mennonite refugees had arrived from Europe. This was a dramatic increase over the 542 who had come the previous year. In 1949 the Board brought over another 1635. Between 1947 and 1954, a total of 8271 displaced Mennonites came to Canada under the auspices of the Board of Colonization.<sup>11</sup>

The vast majority of refugees assisted by MCC and the Board of Colonization were from the Soviet Union. However, over 700 were Mennonites from Prussia and the free city of Danzig. Among the millions of displaced persons found throughout Europe at war's end were approximately 2000 Mennonites from Prussia, Poland and Danzig. During the Soviet advance in early 1945 they had fled their homes and joined millions of others in a dramatic escape via the Baltic Sea. They eventually found themselves in refugee camps in Denmark and northern Germany, unable to return to their homes. MCC workers learned of the fate of these Mennonites and tried to assist them. But because the refugees were considered German nationals, initially they could not be admitted to Canada, nor were they eligible for financial assistance from the International Refugee Organization (the IRO assisted and paid for the

transportation of all non-ethnic, not ethnic, Germans to the point of disembarkation in their new homes). Fortunately, the Canadian Christian Council for Resettlement of Refugees (CCCR) and the Canadian Pacific Railway were ready to assist. In 1950 the CCCR persuaded the government to admit German nationals. Additionally, the CPR agreed to provide credit of \$180,000 (the amount of interest paid on the 1920s *Reiseschuld*) to transport these refugees. In this way, the Board was able to bring 777 Danzig and Prussian Mennonites to Canada by 1951, in addition to the nearly 7000 Mennonites from the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

The 1940s rescue of Mennonite refugees differed in a number of ways from that of the 1920s, the most significant, from JJ's perspective, being the amount of energy expended per immigrant by Board and MCC staff. The 1940s immigrants numbered less than half the earlier group, but the legwork done on their behalf was much greater due to all the special immigration schemes and unique circumstances. JJ was not one to be daunted by the work. Like David Toews before him, he was fond of quoting the words of Moses before Pharaoh, “. . . not a hoof shall be left behind” (Exodus 10:26), to emphasize the Board's determination to carry on until every last qualifying Mennonite had set foot on Canadian soil.<sup>13</sup> He also frequently ended his reports to Board meetings and conferences with an exhortation not to grow weary:

. . . Indications are that our generation is growing tired, weary. We are in danger of withdrawing from being advocates of the position. This could also happen to the relief program. We dare not stand still . . . we must push forward. As soon as we become weary then the results will suffer. We must take the offensive. Our enemy everywhere is *need*, and as Christians we must take a stand. We dare not rest on our accomplishments but must always ask ourselves: Have we done everything that can be done? Have we the right to stand back? Can we allow ourselves to become tired? Never!<sup>14</sup>

Of course, the work of the Board was not the work of JJ alone. As chairperson and the one who was in the public eye, he received much of the credit for the post-war immigration movement. However, without the daily labours of his faithful co-workers the mammoth undertaking could not possibly have been accomplished. Particular mention must go to JJ's assistant, Katie Hooge. A very gifted young woman, Katie had come to Canada in 1923 with her parents. She had planned to study medicine in a Russian university, but the civil war had dashed those dreams. Instead, she had given language instruction to children whose schooling was interrupted by the political turmoil. In addition to German and Russian, she had learned French and English. Her intelligence and her facility in



*Katie Hooge worked for the Board of Colonization from 1923 until it was incorporated into the new Mennonite Central Committee Canada in 1964. She was also a personal assistant, first to David Toews, then J.J. Thiessen. Photo: Patkau: First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon*

English landed her a position as secretary with the Board of Colonization soon after her arrival in Rosthern. There she became David Toews' right hand and worked with him until the time of his resignation.

Katie continued as assistant to JJ when he assumed leadership of the Board in 1946. Initially she missed "my deceased Ältester Toews," but she and JJ quickly developed a good working relationship.<sup>15</sup> For a time after relocation of the Board office to Saskatoon, she maintained her residence in Rosthern, returning there on weekends to be with her widowed mother and to fulfil her Sunday school teaching obligations at the Rosenorter Church. In 1949 she and Mrs. Hooge moved to Saskatoon where they became members of First Mennonite Church.

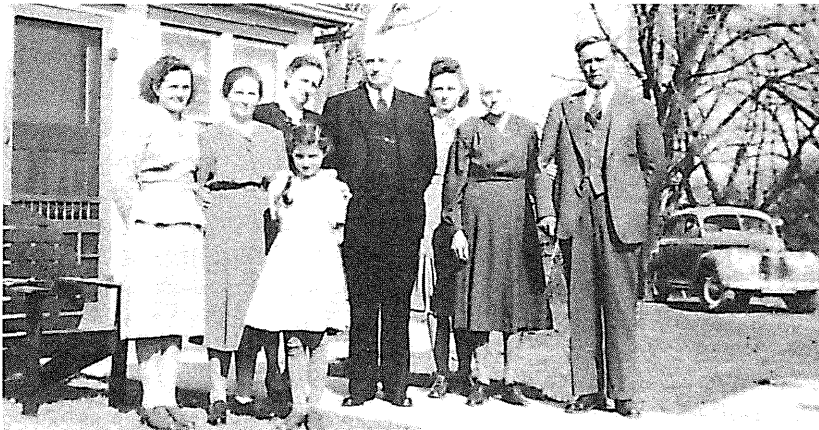
Katie worked diligently and conscientiously. She typed, filed and managed a mountain of correspondence. Over a three-month period in 1951, she mailed more than 1700 letters, with a total of 685 going out in March alone. She researched and wrote many of the reports which JJ, as chairperson, presented to the annual meetings of the Board and to the supporting conferences. She managed the office and attended to various inquiries in JJ's absence. She worked long hours of overtime without receiving extra pay, although in 1948 the Board honoured her 25 years of service with a gift of \$500. She also acted as personal secretary to JJ, attending to work which stemmed from his other involvements. Her contribution to the immigration movement was enormous.

### **Family Reunited**

For JJ, perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the immigration work was to play a part in reuniting members of his family. Eventually he

learned that, in addition to Helena and Jacob Neufeld with their two remaining children Erika and Jacob, several other close relatives were in Europe and eager to join him and Tina in Canada. These included: his sister-in law Helene Thiessen (wife of brother Johann) with two grown children, Gerhard and Lena; his sister Margareta Ruppel with daughters Rita, Lena, Herta and Irma; and a niece Margareta Nordheimer (daughter of brother Gerhard) with her husband, Friedrich, and baby daughter. By July 1946 JJ had filed papers indicating his willingness to sponsor these relatives, promising to assume personal responsibility for their welfare, including any travel debts incurred, and to ensure that they found jobs on farms. In the meantime, JJ contacted several friends and a cousin, all of whom were fruit farmers in the St. Catharines area of Ontario, asking if his kinfolk might live and work with them, at least temporarily.<sup>16</sup>

It took some time and considerable effort before the extended Thiessen family could be reunited in Canada. The first to arrive, in April 1948, were Margareta Ruppel and her three youngest daughters. Sister-in-law Helena Thiessen, along with her daughter Leni and aging mother, came in late 1948, as did Margareta Nordheimer and her family. The Neufeld family followed the next year. Their acceptance by Canada immigration authorities had been delayed several times because of Jacob Neufeld's physical disability and daughter Erika's tuberculosis. JJ wrote a number of letters on the Neufeld family's behalf to his friend, A.L. Joliffe, Director of the Immigration Branch, asking that his office do what it could on behalf of the Neufelds. JJ's niece, Rita Rempel and her husband had to wait until 1950 before coming to Canada.



*JJ and Tina in St. Catharines in April 1948 soon after the arrival of JJ's sister, Margareta Ruppel (second from left), together with daughters Helena, Irma and Herta. The Ruppel's hosts, Gerhard and Lisa Dyck, are on the right.*



The case of Gerhard Thiessen, JJ's nephew, was most interesting. Young Gerhard had been a teenager in 1941 when the German army had occupied the Molotschna colony, including the village of Klippenfeld. Like most young fellows, Gerhard was forcibly inducted into the *Waffen SS*, a branch of the German Army. This took place in 1942; many more Mennonites were inducted in 1943. Gerhard and some 140 other young men in similar circumstances had managed to survive the war and now wished to settle in Canada, but their association with the *Waffen SS* was very problematic. Unfortunately, few of them still possessed the documents that could verify that their induction had not been voluntary. All they could do was to make a declaration through an affidavit. Once again, JJ wrote to his friends in Ottawa and elsewhere, asking for special consideration for his nephew, whose father and brothers had all met their deaths at the hands of the Soviets. He wrote,

Mr. Jolliffe, you will understand that I am inclined to ask for special consideration in view of the outlined circumstances, and that I am very anxious to have my nephew come to Canada to live under normal conditions. I am prepared to vouch that he is politically dependable. Our family have [sic] never believed in political dictatorship and Gerhard is free from bolshevism and naziism.<sup>17</sup>

Many more letters followed. At one point, T.O.F. Herzer of the CCCRR advised JJ to hold off on his appeals, because he feared they might jeopardize CCCRR's efforts on behalf of all former *Waffen SS* men. But JJ continued to write more letters, pleading for Gerhard and his family as tactfully as he could. Not wanting to rouse the anger of Immigration officials, he quoted Genesis 18:32, ". . . Oh, do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more." As it turned out, Gerhard eventually did receive favourable consideration. This may have been due to JJ's letters, or to the fact that an official within the CPR vouched for JJ's personal integrity to the Ministry of Immigration. Gerhard, his wife Ilse and their young son arrived in November 1951. By this time, the Minister of Immigration had ruled that persons who had joined the *Waffen SS* after January 1, 1943 would no longer be rejected outright; it was understood that they had been inducted under duress. However, Gerhard had been conscripted in March 1942, nearly a year before the cut-off date. Officially, persons like him, whose membership pre-dated 1943, had to wait until 1955 before barriers to their entry were fully removed (they were under suspicion of having volunteered for service).

In many ways JJ's work with the Board of Colonization was a part-time job which he carried out in addition to his regular work as pastor at First Mennonite Church. He devoted several days a week to Board work,

not including the time spent in Ottawa, Winnipeg, or elsewhere on immigration-related business. He received some compensation for his labours; in 1950 the amount was \$125 per month.<sup>18</sup> But if his work with the Board was the most strenuous and time-consuming of his extra responsibilities, it was certainly not the only one. Closely related to the Board of Colonization, of which JJ was chairperson, was the Mennonite Central Relief Committee (MCRC), of which he served as vice-chairperson. The MCRC relief program expanded significantly in the post-war period. The tremendous relief and reconstruction needs in Europe, as well as the struggle of refugees to build a new home in South America, found responsive hearts among western Canadian Mennonites. The post-war prosperity made it possible for MCRC supporters to give more than they ever had before. In 1947 MCRC financial contributions reached \$118,734.<sup>19</sup> Besides dollars, the MCRC also shipped canned meat, fruit and vegetables, and new and used clothing. In 1944 a special MCRC clothing depot was opened at the firm of C.A. DeFehr and Sons in Winnipeg. (DeFehr became one of the MB members of MCRC in 1946.) During the war, all of the cash and material goods gathered for relief by MCRC had been channelled through Mennonite Central Committee. Beginning in 1949 MCRC also initiated its own program of direct support for Mennonites in Paraguay.

### **Foreign Missions**

In 1947 JJ's wider church involvement expanded further when he was invited to become a member of the Foreign Mission Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church which had been established in 1872. In the first half century it had focused its missionary endeavours in India, China and among aboriginal Americans. After World War II, a healthy treasury and quickened interest in the wider world resulted in the opening of new fields in Colombia, Japan, Taiwan and South America.<sup>20</sup> In South America, the Mission Board's work primarily involved supporting and assisting colonies of recent Mennonite refugees from Europe, settlements begun initially by Mennonite Central Committee. (In 1950 the Home Mission Board and the Foreign Mission Board were merged into one Mission Board with two sections: home and foreign.)

JJ was already very familiar with the work of the General Conference. Since 1930 he had been employed by the Home Mission Board. In 1938 he had helped to host the GC triennial sessions in Saskatoon. Beginning that same year, he had also served several terms on the GC program committee. In 1940 he had travelled within the United States, visiting Newton, Kansas, the home of both the GC offices and Bethel College, the GC liberal arts college. The college made a deep impression on him

and provided much of the inspiration for the development of a post-secondary Mennonite Bible college in Canada.

JJ's appointment to the GC Foreign Mission Board was indicative of the growing interest in foreign missions within the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. Annual mission festivals were becoming important events in many congregations. *Frauenvereine* (women's organizations) in the churches were increasingly active in fund raising for missions. Many women's groups "adopted" a missionary or missionary couple and helped to finance their education and transportation to and from the field. In Manitoba, the Bergthaler cluster of congregations, which was part of CMC, initiated its own foreign mission outreach to Mexico in the mid-1940s. Henry and Susan Gerbrandt were commissioned specifically for that task. The Mexico project proved short-lived since the Gerbrandts could not obtain the necessary visas to carry on their work. As a result, the Bergthaler church shifted its energies to a ministry among aboriginal people of northern Manitoba. Initially this ministry was called Manitoba Pioneer Mission; it was assumed by CMC in the mid-1950s.

Scholars who have studied the missionary impulse of the Mennonite church in North America over the years argue that a major influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was Protestant evangelicalism.<sup>21</sup> Paramount for evangelicals was the proclamation of the Gospel for the purpose of bringing about personal conversion. The task of the missionary was, above all, to proclaim the Word, in order to draw people to repentance and acceptance of the saving power of Jesus Christ. This emphasis brought renewal and new life to Mennonite churches, but it also eroded some of the more holistic aspects of the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage and theology. This was reflected in Mennonite mission agencies and missionary activity. As Mennonite missions emphasized conversion, they downplayed life-long discipleship and obedience as ongoing signs of conversion. As they accentuated doctrines concerning sin and salvation, they neglected nonresistance and witnessing for peace. As they focused on individual decisions for Christ, they undermined the importance of church and faith community. Of course, the reality of Mennonite missions was a great deal more complex, but this was the general thrust of Mennonite mission activity until the mid-twentieth century.

JJ's theology of mission reflected the influence of evangelicalism, even while it affirmed some key Anabaptist-Mennonite components. On the one hand, he embraced the evangelical passion for conversion. He was concerned that each person experience salvation through the repentance of sins and come into a "personal relationship with Christ." This included the six million persons found in the mission fields of the

General Conference Foreign Mission Board—120 souls for each member of a General Conference church!<sup>22</sup> It also included young people growing up in the context of the church. According to JJ, one could not assume that these “children of the church” would become Christians. They needed to experience salvation and conversion. He also resorted to language that was militantly evangelistic at times. “The strategy of evangelistic advance calls for united and concentrated attack on all fronts,” he exhorted in the early 1960s.<sup>23</sup> At one point a member of JJ’s church complained about his “cheap revivalist preaching.”<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, JJ emphasized that conversion must bear fruit in a transformed life. His long experience in home mission work had taught him that testimonies of “being saved” did not mean much if they did not lead to faithful discipleship. For JJ, Jesus’ Great Commission included both the admonition to “proclaim the Good News” *and* “to make disciples.” He also noted the importance of the church, the body of believers, to the life of individual Christians. Indeed, he could hardly imagine a Christian not participating in corporate worship, fellowship and service.<sup>25</sup> But his theology of mission lacked an understanding of the Gospel as a Gospel of peace. Like many Mennonite missionaries and mission administrators of his day, he failed to make an explicit link between faithfulness and nonresistance. That connection would be made by a later generation, which was committed to a more distinctively Anabaptist-Mennonite mission witness.<sup>26</sup>

One area where JJ took a fairly enlightened position was with respect to the role of women in missions. From the beginning of First Mennonite Church, he had encouraged the *Frauenverein* to raise funds for missions. As a member of the Foreign Mission Board, he was now in a position to urge other church women’s groups to do the same and he readily acknowledged their contribution. In 1951, for instance, he insisted that a special thank-you to the *Frauenverein* be included in the minutes of the 1951 Conference of Mennonites in Canada sessions; evidently, the secretary had forgotten this item.<sup>27</sup> In the 1960s, he made the comment, “The ladies’ aids in our conference have abundantly justified their existence. We could hardly imagine the work in a Mennonite church without a mission society. If it were not for the zeal of the women, their sacrificial service and generous giving, many projects would never have started and others would have died on the way long ago.”<sup>28</sup> He also encouraged the provincial women’s organization to establish a scholarship at Rosthern’s German-English Academy to assist girls, possibly potential missionaries, to complete their high school education. The scholarship was named in honour of Margareta Toews.

In addition, JJ made a point of encouraging specific women to

become missionaries. One young woman was Helen Kornelsen of Watrous, Saskatchewan. Helen was a student at Rosthern Bible School when JJ first met her. Later on, she lived with the Thiessen family while teaching vacation Bible school in the Pleasant Hill mission. JJ evidently saw considerable promise in her for he suggested she prepare for the mission field by completing her high school education at Rosthern Junior College and then attending Bethel College. He even arranged for the Saskatchewan women's organization to finance her studies. On July 21, 1949 he ordained her for mission work in India, the first of 28 missionaries he ordained.

For the time in which he lived, JJ took a liberal position with regard to the ordination of women missionaries. In many denominations, including the Mennonite Brethren conference, women were "commissioned" rather than "ordained." Commissioning was a way of identifying a lesser role for women in the mission field. The General Conference took the position that women should be ordained, even though it stipulated that women not perform marriages or carry out the functions of elder (baptize or serve communion). This was published in its 1950 *Minister's Manual*.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, there was evidently some confusion, particularly relating to the wives of male missionaries. On a number of occasions, JJ inquired of the Mission Board executive director about the status of wives, not because he felt they should not be ordained but because the policy was unclear. In 1955 a sub-committee of the Foreign Mission Board found it necessary to clarify the matter. The committee recommended ordination for all missionaries, male or female, married or single.<sup>30</sup> JJ supported this.<sup>31</sup>

In the late 1940s and 1950s it was understood that women could not preach, teach or lead worship in their home congregations, although they could do so on the mission field. At the time JJ accepted this double standard, but some years later he advocated that ordination for foreign mission work also qualified a woman for ministry in Canada. Esther Patkau was ordained in 1951 for missionary service in Japan. In the 1970s she returned to Canada and was called to serve on the pastoral staff at Saskatoon's First Mennonite Church. At the congregational meeting where a decision was to be finalized, JJ spoke up in favour of extending the call. He also argued against a second ordination.<sup>32</sup> Some congregations and leaders believed that ordination for foreign mission work did not bestow authority for ministry in North American churches.

As Canadian representative on the GC Foreign Mission Board, JJ was expected to promote the Board's work in Canada. He did so with his typical energy and enthusiasm and devoted many hours to this service. The promotion work involved recruiting young men and women as



*Helen Kornelsen*



*Esther Patkau*

*Both of these women were ordained for foreign mission work by JJ, Helen in 1949 for work in India and Esther in 1951 for service in Japan. In the 1970s JJ favoured Esther's call to join the pastoral staff at First Mennonite without a second ordination. Photos: Helen Kornelsen and Esther Patkau*

potential missionaries, counselling them and encouraging them in their studies and other preparations, and frequently ordaining them. Helen Kornelsen and Esther Patkau were only two of scores of young people whom JJ brought into the circle of GC mission work. When missionaries were “on furlough” in North America, he also made arrangements for extensive speaking tours for them. He solicited funds for the Foreign Mission Board in Canada and had oversight of its Canadian treasury.

JJ was once again assisted ably in this work by Katie Hooge. Although Katie had been hired as secretary for the Board of Colonization, in truth she was really JJ's executive assistant, doing whatever work he required, whether it related to the Board of Colonization, the Mennonite Central Relief Committee, the Foreign Mission Board, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada or even First Mennonite Church. The Foreign Mission Board work necessitated, once again, that she type many letters, write hundreds of receipts annually, receive and disburse Foreign Mission Board funds, and balance the account books. Initially she did all this extra work without any remuneration or acknowledgement. In 1953 JJ requested an allowance of \$25 per month be granted for Katie's services. This was approved.<sup>33</sup>

Through the last years of the 1940s and the 1950s there was an explosion of interest within CMC churches in foreign missions. In the

decade 1940–1949, only two Canadians had been commissioned for service under the Foreign Mission Board; between 1950 and 1959 the total number of Canadians reached 41. This latter number does not include the 60 or so Canadians who served for shorter or longer periods of time in the Mennonite colonies in South America. Canadian donations likewise increased significantly. In 1949 contributions amounted to \$30,700; by 1958 they had grown to \$116,000. There are many reasons for these dramatic increases. As already mentioned, the war contributed to a new interest in foreign lands and peoples, and the post-war economic boom facilitated much expansion in the mission program. The newly established Canadian Mennonite Bible College offered the initial level of biblical and theological training that was required of GC missionaries. The women's organizations were promoting and popularizing the cause of missions within and among Mennonite churches. Last but not least, J.J. Thiessen—and Katie Hooge—were hard at work.

JJ's involvement with the Foreign Mission Board broadened his horizons. But it was not the outreach in far-flung and exotic places such as Asia and Africa which captured his imagination. Rather, it was the ministry among the formerly displaced Mennonites now in South America which lay closest to his heart. Indeed, he often felt that the Mission Board should do more to build up the Mennonite church there. He was known to quote the Apostle Paul: "It should be our aim to build God's Kingdom first in Jerusalem and then continue to the uttermost parts of the earth."<sup>34</sup> For him, the South American Mennonites represented Jerusalem. JJ's passion for the brothers and sisters in the South was a common thread drawing together all those committee and board involvements which were internationally focused. Before exploring this interest in greater depth, it is important to describe JJ's connection with Mennonite Central Committee.

### **Membership in Mennonite Central Committee**

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) had been formed in 1920 by American Mennonites seeking to respond collectively to the crisis facing their co-religionists in Russia. Although an American body, Canadian congregations had supported MCC financially in the 1920s and, with the outbreak of World War II, their contributions of money and material goods grew substantially. Also during the war, several Canadians joined the growing ranks of MCC voluntary service workers. In 1943, MCC representatives held a special meeting in Winnipeg, together with representatives of the Canadian relief organizations, as a way of drawing them closer into its orbit. The following year MCC also established a Canadian office in Kitchener, Ontario. Its purpose was to coordinate the

clothing collection program in Canada, to facilitate the processing of Canadian voluntary service workers, to provide a means whereby MCC could communicate with the Canadian government on relief matters, and to provide MCC information to Canadians on a bilingual basis (the MCC head office in Akron, Pennsylvania, dealt only in English).<sup>35</sup>

It was only a matter of time before the issue of Canadian representation on the governing body of MCC would surface. At the time, MCC was led by a 22-member board representing the various conferences (Mennonite, Brethren in Christ and Amish) and several conference relief committees. The larger board met only once a year. A five-member elected Executive Committee met four or five times annually. In theory, Canadian Mennonites who belonged to binational conferences bodies, such as the General Conference, Mennonite Brethren and (Old) Mennonite Church, were represented on MCC through the persons elected or appointed by those conferences. Invariably, however, these representatives were Americans, and Canadian concerns and interests did not have an official voice, either at the level of the general membership or the powerful Executive Committee. Late in 1944 the Executive Committee explored the legalities of naming specifically Canadian representatives to its membership; this was cleared. A decision was then made to invite each of four Canadian committees—the Mennonite Central Relief Committee (MCRC), the Canadian Mennonite Relief Committee (CMRC), the Non-Resistant Relief Organization (NRRO) and the Conference of Historic Peace Churches (CHPC)—to name a representative to the membership. C.F. Klassen, as secretary-treasurer of MCRC, had been attending MCC meetings and even Executive Committee meetings unofficially for some time. In 1944 his membership on both had been formalized. Then in January 1946 JJ was named by MCRC as a second representative to MCC, most likely to serve as proxy for Klassen while he was attending to refugee work in Europe. Evidently, this arrangement proved unsatisfactory to JJ, for in spring 1947, the Board of Colonization requested that MCC name JJ as an ex-officio member of the Executive Committee, given the similar nature of the work of the two organizations and the need for close cooperation.<sup>36</sup> This request was granted. In 1948 MCC enlarged its Executive Committee to six members and formally appointed JJ as a sixth member.

What is significant about all this is that JJ's appointment to the MCC Executive Committee was somewhat irregular. He evidently manoeuvred his way into the position. Presumably he did so in order to advocate more effectively on behalf of Mennonite refugees in Europe and the new settlements in Paraguay. But the reality was that his membership on the Executive Committee had the effect of further strengthening his influence



within the matrix of North America Mennonite institutions. At the Executive Committee he worked together with the following influential men: P.C. Hiebert, chairperson of MCC since its beginnings and also chairperson of the North American MB conference; Harold S. Bender, dean of Goshen College; H.A. Fast, professor at Bethel College and executive secretary of the General Conference Emergency Relief Fund; and Orië O. Miller, MCC Executive Secretary. Each of these men, like JJ, sat on the boards and committees of numerous Mennonite organizations and thus wielded enormous power. One historian has noted that their “overlapping and interlocking relationships” gave a fairly small group of men “almost complete control of most major Mennonite institutions.”<sup>37</sup> The web of leadership that these men represented enabled them to accomplish a great deal, but it also created considerable confusion at times. In 1948 JJ was the newcomer to the MCC Executive Committee table; like the other men around it, his stay would be lengthy—he would serve as a member until 1964.

The MCC headquarters was located in the small town of Akron, Pennsylvania, home of Orië O. Miller who had been on the Executive Committee since his return from Russia in 1921. In 1935 he had been elected secretary-treasurer (this eventually developed into the position of Executive Secretary), and the office had been relocated from Scottdale, home of the previous secretary-treasurer, to Akron, where Miller had a shoe manufacturing business. Most Executive meetings were held at the Atlantic Hotel in Chicago because it was more centrally located than Akron. Many of the GC Mission Board meetings also took place there for the same reason.

### **An Argument with MCC**

Ever since MCC had provided relief to his people in Russia, JJ had had a warm regard for the organization. But in his early years on the Executive Committee he had some major disagreements with MCC leadership. There were several reasons for this tension. JJ and members of the Board of Colonization perceived that MCC did not place enough priority on resettling Mennonite refugees in Canada after World War II. If more energy had been expended by MCC field workers on behalf of the Canadian cause, they felt, many more refugees could have found a home in Canada. But JJ’s bigger complaint was that he was convinced that the MCC organization was not doing nearly enough for the new Mennonite settlements in South America.

MCC’s involvement there had begun in the early 1930s when it had helped to resettle 2000 Russian Mennonites in Paraguay and Brazil. These refugees were among those who fled to Moscow in the last weeks

of 1929, their sights on Canada. When Canada would not receive them, MCC made arrangements to resettle them in the South. Fernheim was the name given to the colony established in the Chaco district of northwestern Paraguay in 1930. A daughter colony named Friesland was founded in the eastern part of the country in 1937. The Brazilian settlements were named Auhagen and Witmarsum. (They received the majority of their financial assistance from the German government rather than MCC.) After World War II, a new and much larger wave of refugees led to the establishment of several new settlements. Volendam and Neuland were each founded in Paraguay in 1947, located near Friesland and Fernheim, respectively. These were populated disproportionately by women and children, since many husbands and fathers had disappeared in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In addition, in 1948 MCC settled Prussian Mennonite refugees in Uruguay.

Financial help from MCC to the post-war colonists took a variety of forms. An MCC-sponsored financial organization facilitated the purchase of land. As well, MCC provided a basic maintenance allowance of \$5.50 per person per month for an initial three months after the time of arrival and additional funds for shared farm equipment. A special gifts-in-kind program enabled Mennonites in Canada and the United States to collect utensils, tools and machinery for settlers in Paraguay and Uruguay. MCC resources were also channelled into initiatives that would enhance the long-term economic viability of the colonies. The assistance from MCC was appreciated, but the pioneer years were extremely difficult nevertheless. The hot dry climate, the remote and isolated settings, the dire poverty, the shortage of men, and the emotional and spiritual exhaustion that resulted from war and uncertainty—all these made the early years arduous indeed. Many people felt that MCC was not doing nearly enough.

Like many Mennonites in Canada, particularly those who had immigrated from Russia in the 1920s, JJ had a special concern for the people trying to make a new home in the South. These were his people. No, none of his immediate relatives had made their way to Paraguay, but many friends and acquaintances from his earlier life had. Even more important than any personal connection, however, was the fact that these struggling people were fellow Mennonites. The suffering of those of the “family of faith” could not be ignored. As letters from the South American colonists began to pour into the office of the Board of Colonization and the Mennonite Central Relief Committee, pleading for assistance, JJ became convinced that rehabilitating the *Glaubensgenossen* in the South needed to be MCC’s top priority.

He took these concerns to the MCC Executive Committee meetings. In this, he found a staunch and outspoken ally in his MB co-worker, B.B.

Janz. JJ had reason to be displeased with Janz on other matters, but they were united on the issue of aid for the Mennonite refugees in Paraguay. With the backing of their two organizations, the Mennonite Central Relief Committee and the Board of Colonization, the two men became strong advocates for increased aid to the South. However, at the MCC Executive Committee their concerns were not always understood. The majority of members did not share the strong bonds of family and history that united many Canadians with those in the South. Moreover, they were eager to expand MCC activity to other needy peoples and regions of the globe. In the late 1940s, MCC in fact reduced its expenditures for programs among the South America settlements in favour of increased expenditures in the Far East and elsewhere. In JJ's mind, this was a very unfortunate choice.

But he did more than just plead the cause at MCC meetings. He also encouraged the Board of Colonization and Mennonite Central Relief Committee to send funds directly to Paraguay to meet needs that MCC could or would not alleviate. As early as 1947 the Board allocated \$1000 to assist schools in the Neuland and Volendam colonies; this was completely separate from its support of MCC's program in Paraguay. As a result of some administrative bungling, this money actually ended up in the hands of the MCC representatives in Asuncion, Paraguay who, for unknown reasons, failed to forward it to the intended schools.<sup>38</sup> This was very annoying to Board officials. By the late 1940s, MCRC was also diverting significant sums from its revenues directly to non-MCC-supported projects. In 1951, the organization adopted as a general guideline that it would devote roughly half its budget to the MCC general fund and the other half for direct assistance to Paraguay.

### **A Trip to South America**

For JJ, a four-month trip to the South American settlements in 1950 gave him opportunity to see the needs firsthand. His trip came about as a result of appeals by South American leaders that he, as chairperson of the Canadian Conference, visit them in order to strengthen the bonds of fellowship between North and South. In 1949 CMC took this request to the General Conference Home Mission Board, requesting that it grant him a leave of absence from his duties in Saskatoon and that it also sponsor his trip. Although MCC had already expressed interest in sending JJ to South America as one of its own representatives, he and other CMC leaders felt it wiser that he go on behalf of the conferences rather than MCC.<sup>39</sup> The Home Mission Board agreed to CMC's request. At the 1950 annual sessions the Canadian Conference resolved to raise funds on its own so that Tina could accompany JJ.

Of the three overseas trips that he made during the decade after the war, the 1950 journey to South America was the most significant. Lasting four months and including five countries, it was by far the most ambitious in scope. Except when illness forced both JJ and Tina to postpone or cancel engagements for several days, they kept a gruelling pace. Beginning early in the morning and often continuing until late at night, they visited homes, schools, businesses, cooperatives and hospitals. They met with ministers, deacons, civic leaders, teachers, doctors and nurses, young people's and women's groups, as well as GC missionaries and MCC field workers. They attended ministers' conferences, teachers' gatherings, missionary meetings, weddings and numerous worship services. JJ preached or shared a devotional countless times; Tina had opportunities to speak to women's groups about their involvement with the *Mädchenheim* in Saskatoon. (During their absence, daughter Hedie Loewen managed affairs at the *Mädchenheim*.) The fact that Tina could accompany JJ on this trip meant a great deal to both of them.

Besides the strenuous pace of the trip, additional challenges tested both their stamina. Only in the second week of the journey, both came down with a serious case of grippe, requiring nearly a week's delay in their schedule. A short while later JJ had a bad attack of gall stones and again had to postpone or cancel a number of engagements. He wrote, "I would so much like to be strong and healthy. I cannot afford to break down as the work is far from completed. God help me!"<sup>40</sup>



*On JJ and Tina's 1950 visit to South America, he kept his usual hectic schedule, including preaching at worship services and participating in baptisms, weddings and funerals. Photo: George & Mildred Buhr*

In addition, they were confronted with poor and impassable roads, vehicle breakdowns and two forced landings which resulted from engine problems with the small four-seater plane taking them from Fernheim to the capital city of Asuncion in Paraguay. The landings were rather frightening for Tina who described them in her diary. Unfortunately, her fears were not allayed when a new plane arrived, complete with barefoot cigar-smoking pilot. "It all seemed so unreliable and untrustworthy," she wrote. "We were all happy when we once again had solid ground under our feet."<sup>41</sup>

Another unplanned adventure occurred late one night en route from Friesland to Rosario, also in Paraguay. JJ and Tina's companions were not able to find overnight accommodation for the group, so they all spread blankets and ponchos out on the grass and slept under the Paraguayan stars. The hard ground and the vicious mosquitoes would have overwhelmed many a northern visitor, but according to the report of one Friesland *Ältester*, JJ kept his good humour. Pulling his old hat over his bald head and gloves over his hands, he kept most of the mosquitoes at bay. In the morning he announced to Tina, "This was the nicest night in my whole life."

The motto of the trip, JJ announced wherever they went, were the words of Joseph as found in Genesis 37: 15: "I seek my brethren." It is ironic that he chose this as his theme. Within the new post-war settlements, women significantly outnumbered men, a fact of which he was well aware. On the first shipload of refugees to arrive from Germany in



*Mennonite refugees who settled in Paraguay after World War II were predominantly women—so many men and older boys had been killed or exiled in Russia. This group of 19 "women without men" helped to establish the Volendam colony.*

1947 were 950 adult women, with only 444 men 16 years of age or older. In all the villages of Neuland and Volendam colonies, women outnumbered men. In fact in Friedensheim, commonly known as Frauendorf (women's village), all 147 of the initial adult inhabitants were women.<sup>42</sup> But for JJ, this significant demographic reality was reflected in only a few brief observations. After a visit to Neuland, he made a note to himself that only 40 percent of families had a father, and therefore relief should be continued especially to women with small children. But apart from the visits made in homes, most of his contacts were with the male leadership in the colonies. Thus, his observations and recommendations reflected those of the men with whom he conferred. From time to time, Tina absented herself from the many official and semi-official meetings, and spent more time with the women. At one point in her travel diary, she noted, "My heart ached for the poor women who have to work so hard. . . ."<sup>43</sup>

They did not meet any close relatives on their journey, but they did meet many friends from Russia, including some of JJ's former students and teaching colleagues. David Boschmann, a student in the Fischau school when JJ had taught there, was delighted to observe that his former teacher's step was still quick and energetic and his eyes still twinkled.<sup>44</sup> The Thiessens also met friends and relatives of people they knew in Canada. Tina recorded in her diary the names of all these new acquaintances so they could be remembered and so their greetings could be passed on to loved ones in the North.

In many ways, the journey reminded JJ and Tina of their former life in Russia. To be sure, the geographic context was very different. But so much about the communities they visited brought to mind a time and place and way of life they had long lost. The colony system, the layout of villages, the schools and hospitals, the organization of church, community and economic life—all these recalled for them another era. JJ found it a special joy to attend a teachers' conference in Fernheim, writing, "The good old days came back to me—when I was an active member of the Mennonite teachers federation in Russia."<sup>45</sup> Just a few days after their thirty-third anniversary, JJ and Tina attended a wedding in Neuland Colony. It reminded them of their own wedding in Tiegenhagen in 1917 and made him realize how much the weddings he now performed had departed from traditional ways. If there were moments of nostalgia and sentimentality, the tragic stories which they heard throughout their travels confirmed a grim and painful reality: that the Mennonite communities of southern Russia were no more. Over cups of coffee in kitchens throughout the new Mennonite settlements, they shed tears with sisters and brothers who had suffered years of Stalinist oppression and war.

### Problems in Paraguay

The trip to South America confirmed for JJ the importance of MCC providing ongoing and generous assistance to the Mennonite colonies. B.B. Janz had made a similar journey in 1947 and reached the same conclusion. The trip revealed to JJ that there were other reasons that colonists were unhappy with MCC. One of these had to do with National Socialist sympathies that had arisen in Fernheim colony during the war, and the strong opposition registered by MCC administrators and field personnel. The other reason was the way in which some MCC workers had exacerbated tensions between MB and *kirchliche* groups in the colonies. Both of these were extremely complex issues, but they deserve mention, even at the risk of over-simplification.

Fernheim colony was founded in 1930 by MCC as a home for those Russian Mennonites who had tried to escape the Soviet Union in 1929. When Canada would not accept them and when the Soviets threatened forcible relocation to Siberia, these refugees found a temporary home in Germany. The following year, the majority proceeded to Fernheim in Paraguay with a minority settling in Brazil. During World War II, a pro-Nazi movement took root in Fernheim.<sup>46</sup> Several reasons have been offered for this: the refugees' gratitude to Germany for offering them asylum at a time of crisis, their affinity for Hitler's virulent anti-communism, and the powerful and persuasive leadership of two men: Fritz Kliewer, principal of the Fernheim *Zentralschule*, and Julius Legiehn, the colony administrator. Kliewer and Legiehn led the establishment of a *völkische*<sup>47</sup> movement which vigorously promoted support for Hitler's Nazis. Many colonists, particularly from the Mennonite Brethren congregation, rallied to support the movement. Given the Mennonite position on nonresistance, this development was highly controversial and, before long, people had aligned themselves with one of two camps: the *völkische* or the *wehrlose* (nonresistant). On March 11, 1944 matters came to a head in a violent encounter between two different factions of the *völkische* group over the issue of leadership of the colony. Soon after this, the Paraguayan government, under pressure from American authorities, deported both Kliewer and Legiehn from the colony.

From the first intimations of Nazi sympathies in Fernheim, MCC had vigorously opposed the movement. In 1940 a strongly worded letter, signed by P.C. Hiebert, MCC chairperson, and other Executive Committee members, warned Fernheim leaders and residents against abandoning pacifism. Other letters followed, as did visits from Executive Secretary, Orié Miller. In 1943, MCC increased its activity in Paraguay by sending more workers. At least some of them, it seems, were there expressly to stimulate the anti-Nazi movement. One became involved in establishing

a Bible school that was intended to be an alternative to the *Zentralschule* run by Fritz Kliewer.<sup>48</sup> Another worker was there to prevent Fernheim's cooperative from being black-listed by the American government (as a result of the political sympathies of some of the Fernheimers), and thereby risk the loss of MCC revenues.<sup>49</sup> Yet another was responsible for calling the Paraguayan military after the conflicts of March 11, 1944. In the summer of 1944, Orié Miller again visited, armed with a document unequivocally denouncing the *völkische* movement and urging repentance on the part of Fernheimers.

For those Fernheimers who supported the movement, and perhaps even some who did not, MCC's tactics seemed heavy-handed and paternalistic. The people of Fernheim resented the interference of North Americans who did not fully understand them and their circumstances. They were especially sensitive to the fact that MCC served as their landlord and benefactor and could choose to withhold financial assistance if they did not "tow the line" theologically and ideologically.

At the time of JJ's visit to Paraguay in 1950, the hurt feelings within Fernheim and the disillusionment with MCC had lost their intensity, but these sentiments still lingered. During B.B. Janz' visit to Fernheim three years previously, he had tried to bring about a reconciliation between the various MB groups that had been torn by the *völkische* movement. He had had some success. But in 1950, Fritz and Melita Kliewer in particular were still feeling isolated and condemned. While JJ was in Paraguay he met with Kliewer. He was evidently impressed with the man's gifts as a leader and teacher and with his desire to make amends for his mistakes. JJ encouraged him to write a letter of apology to the various church leaders in Fernheim and Kliewer did so. Towards the end of his stay in Paraguay, JJ presided over a special meeting in the MCC home in Fernheim intended to re-establish fellowship between Kliewer and the Fernheim community, and presumably also with MCC.<sup>50</sup>

The other problem that JJ encountered on his journey was the growing rift between MB and *kirchliche* Mennonites in both Paraguay and Brazil. Initially, the two groups had worshipped and worked together well, but by 1950 there was considerable discord and division. Some Mennonites in South America (as well as North Americans serving in the South) placed the blame on the intervention of North American conference leaders. B.B. Janz was one person whose name was mentioned frequently.<sup>51</sup> But others pointed the finger at certain North American MCC workers who violated the understanding that they not show partiality toward any particular group. In Brazil, Robert Seibel was held responsible for the withdrawal of MB families en masse from the Witmarsum settlement where both MBs and *kirchliche* had lived and worked to-



gether. In Paraguay, C.C. Peters was blamed for heightened tensions between MBs and GCs, as well as simply giving MCC a bad name.<sup>52</sup> Peters was an MB minister from Canada who served as principal of the Fernheim *Zentralschule* in the wake of Fritz Kliewer's departure. He was accused of pursuing conference politics and using the classroom as a pulpit. As JJ travelled through the colonies and heard the stories, he was deeply troubled that MCC workers could demonstrate such partiality.

He reported on his trip to the MCC Executive Committee in early December 1950, just a few short weeks after his return. He made several strong recommendations for the MCC programs in Paraguay, as well as Brazil and Uruguay. Most of these related to the issue of financial aid. In brief, he called for continued assistance for schools and hospitals, the establishment of small industries, the purchase of additional land and reconsideration of the debt question.<sup>53</sup> The latter recommendation referred to MCC's practice, much criticized in Canada, of lending funds to the settlers which the contributors considered outright donations. JJ's report also made repeated references to the fact that "influences from the north" had harmed the peace and unity that had existed earlier between the conference groups. He admonished MCC to take greater care in selecting its workers and ensuring that they did not "pursue church politics." He did not address the National Socialism issue in his report or recommendations.

The minutes of the Executive Committee meeting indicate that the report was accepted but no action was taken on any of the recommendations. The reality was that MCC was in very bad financial shape. Overall contributions had dropped from a high of \$4 million in 1947 to nearly \$1 million only three years later. Additional aid to South America could not even be considered. Only a few weeks later, in preparation for the organization's annual meeting, the Executive Committee meeting took action to suspend all new projects and radically reduce ongoing costs.<sup>54</sup>

The relationship between JJ and other members of the MCC Executive Committee became more strained in the weeks and months thereafter. He and several other Canadians chose not to attend the annual MCC meeting in late December 1950. His reason, JJ explained to C.F. Klassen, was that he had already been away from his congregation for so many weeks and simply could not absent himself once again, especially in the busy week between Christmas and New Year's. But he also expressed his dismay over the fact that the total amount allocated for Paraguay aid for 1951 was a mere \$12,000, less than that budgeted for MCC's Europe headquarters in Basel, Switzerland. He wrote, "We in western Canada will always stand up for our brothers in the South even though those in Akron do not understand us." When JJ found it impossible to attend the

March 1951 Executive Committee meeting, he expressed a similar sentiment. Again he wrote to Klassen, “The meetings no longer have the appeal they once had. You will understand this.”<sup>55</sup>

If JJ was disappointed in MCC, some members of MCC were also disappointed in JJ and “the Canadians.” Harold S. Bender, assistant secretary of MCC, interpreted the absence of the Canadians at the 1951 annual meeting as a deliberate boycott intended to register their displeasure over MCC’s priorities.<sup>56</sup> He also blamed them for MCC’s declining revenues. In reality, American donations had also decreased considerably, and there were other reasons for the money crunch. But the fact was that MCRC’s practice of sending monies directly to Paraguay meant that MCC had greater difficulty raising the funds in Canada to cover its budgeted expenditures. Another problem, from MCC’s perspective, was that some of the money which MCRC did forward to MCC was designated for people and projects not included in MCC’s budget. MCC had a policy of honouring the wishes of its donors but doing so meant that it could not carry out its own approved program. MCC administrators discouraged MCRC from sending specially designated gifts before it had raised the full amount it was expected to contribute to the MCC general fund.<sup>57</sup>

The disagreements were not resolved quickly. JJ was pleased that late in 1951 MCC agreed to an additional \$10,000 outlay for Paraguay. No doubt he felt vindicated when J.W. Fretz, an American sociologist commissioned by MCC to do a special investigative study of the South America program, made some of the same recommendations that he had. Still, neither JJ nor B.B. Janz, chairperson of MCRC, were persuaded to alter MCRC’s policy of funding its own program in the South. Special visits from Orié O. Miller to Canada in 1952 and again in 1953—B.B. Janz interpreted these as an attempt to “bring the committee into line”<sup>58</sup>—did not have their hoped-for effect. The MCRC policy remained in place. Eventually, MCC came to accept it and live with it.

JJ’s views over the ministry to Mennonites in South America put him at odds with his colleagues in Mennonite Central Committee. But his overall support for the organization did not flag. He continued to be a strong advocate for MCC, even after he was no longer a member of the Executive Committee.

### **MB-GC Troubles**

On the issue of money for Paraguay, the Mennonite Central Relief Committee tried to present as united a front as possible. But there were significant tensions within the committee, particularly in the relationship between JJ and C.F. Klassen. As a result of JJ’s trip to South America in

1950, he also became rather disenchanted with his colleague, B.B. Janz. He felt that Janz had exacerbated the tensions between MB and *kirchliche* groups.

Some of these tensions had already surfaced in the European refugee camps over the issue of baptism. As a result of the ministry of MCC workers and others in the camps, there were many mass baptismal services. After years of being denied any public religious rituals, many refugees welcomed these baptisms as genuine expressions of faith. Others evidently saw them as a way of enhancing their chances for emigration. (The baptismal certificates provided a way of identifying the refugees as Mennonites, something they needed in order to emigrate.)<sup>59</sup> It seems that GC MCC workers and visiting North American ministers were less rigorous than their MB colleagues in ensuring that baptismal candidates had undergone the necessary conversion experience. This created hard feelings within MB conference leadership in North America and also because of the “interlocking directorates” within MCC.<sup>60</sup>

When Janz visited South America in 1947, he was quite possibly trying to “right the wrongs” he felt were being committed by GCs in Europe. But JJ clearly felt Janz had made matters between the *kirchliche* and the MBs worse. Janz, for instance, had insisted that all MB churches adhere strictly to the practice of baptism by immersion, even rebaptizing persons who had undergone sprinkling or pouring. Evidently, the churches in the South had been somewhat flexible on the mode of baptism previously, and Janz insisted they follow the more strict North American practice. Janz’s hard line approach roused bitter feelings on the part of *kirchliche*. Additionally, JJ was aware that, in the wake of Janz’s 1947 visit, funds from the North American MB conference began to flow southward for the construction of MB church buildings. At a time when the two conference groups were still worshipping jointly, this action did not foster cooperation or trust. Finally, JJ had been told that Janz was behind the split in the Witmarsum colony in Brazil. In his public reports and in his recommendations to MCC, JJ clearly attached blame for the Brazil fiasco to MCC worker Robert Seibel, but in his private diary he intimated that some of the South American leaders were in fact tools of B.B. Janz.<sup>61</sup> And years later, he confided that, in his view, Janz had done the cause of unity and cooperation a good deal of harm.<sup>62</sup>

It does not appear that JJ confronted Janz directly on his activities in the South, at least not in correspondence. In the many letters which he wrote to his colleague during this time, there are no explicit accusations of fomenting discord, only general appeals and exhortations to promote and preserve unity. Certainly, JJ could be frank and open if he felt the situation demanded it. Just before going to South America, he had

exchanged some very forthright words with P.C. Hiebert, chairperson of MCC, over problems in the European refugee camps.<sup>63</sup> But he could also be the tactful diplomat, and this is how he handled his disappointment with Janz. Perhaps he wanted to maintain the united MCRC front. Or perhaps he simply wanted to avoid being drawn into the polarizing and politicking that he found objectionable in others. Several years earlier, Janz had chided him for the way he had handled some difficulties with C.F. Klassen. Perhaps JJ had taken that counsel to heart and made a commitment to strive to work harmoniously with his MB co-workers.

If JJ was, at least inwardly, critical of “Northerners” like Janz who fomented division in the south, he was probably naïve in thinking that he could remain innocent of all such politicking. To be sure, he had gone to South America to serve “all Mennonites without distinction” He had worshipped and met with MBs, *kirchliche*, and Allianz Mennonites alike. He had even made a special visit to the Menno Colony, which had been founded in the 1920s by Sommerfelder and Chortitzer from Manitoba and Bergthaler from Saskatchewan. (These groups had left Canada over the issue of compulsory attendance at public schools.) He had tried to demonstrate respect for all groups. But if he believed he could be completely neutral and non-partisan, he was likely mistaken. After all, he was a minister and mission worker of the General Conference, he still drew some of his salary from the General Conference, and he was now sent as an ambassador to South America by the General Conference. Moreover, once the MB conference began to send money and personnel to assist MB churches in the south, he made sure that the General Conference did the same for the *kirchliche* congregations there.

The experience in South America deepened JJ’s conviction that the only way there could be cooperation and harmony between the *kirchliche* and MBs—indeed between any of the South America groups—was if they could respect one another. He included the following in his written report of the trip:

I do not regret that there are some 20 different branches among our Mennonite people. I am convinced that each of these branches has its own mission and its justification. It is very important that the Old Mennonites always call to our attention the great simplicity in living for the followers of Christ. It is fully justified that the Mennonite Brethren center (sic) their teaching on conversion, and it is of fundamental importance that the General Conference emphasizes conversion and sanctification as belonging together and theory and practise to correspond. The Evangelical [Alliance] Church with its tolerance has contributed much towards better understanding with other churches. As the many different colours in the rainbow contribute towards the beauty of

the rainbow, could the many different branches of our Mennonite church live in harmony between themselves and work together for the glorification of our Creator? It grieves me to see that there is so much friction between the different conferences. It has always been my ideal that one church respect the doctrines of the other and that they live in peace and harmony. It is my sincere wish and prayer that our visit and work in South America might have served to contribute toward the achievement of this goal.<sup>64</sup>

### **Travels**

As JJ's work on behalf of the wider church mushroomed in the years following the war, so did the amount of time he spent away from home. Several times each year he travelled to Ottawa or Winnipeg for immigration-related business. He also criss-crossed the country in his work on behalf of the conference and Canadian Mennonite Bible College. Four or five times annually he found himself at the Atlantic Hotel in Chicago, either for Foreign Mission Board or MCC Executive Committee meetings. Sometimes Mission Board meetings took him to Newton, Kansas. In addition to these domestic travels, he made three overseas trips: to Europe in 1948, to South America in 1950 and to Europe again in 1952. The last of these trips was to attend sessions of the Mennonite World Conference in Karlsruhe, Germany.

Initially, most of JJ's domestic travel was by train. As a minister, he could travel for free, compliments of the Canadian Pacific Railway. However, as commercial air travel became more common and his time more precious, he increasingly travelled by plane, and he became well known by the Saskatoon staff of Trans-Canada Airlines. On at least one occasion, airline workers delayed the departure of a plane for his benefit. JJ valued punctuality greatly and hated to be late for anything. But this one time, the story goes, he neglected to take note of the switch from Standard to Daylight Savings Time the previous night. Consequently, he was not at the airport when his flight was scheduled to depart. With Tina's help, the airline office tracked him down to the home where he was making a pastoral visit. He promptly called two taxis, one to pick up his suitcase at home and one to pick him up. Arriving at the airport about the same time as his bag, he heard the loudspeaker announcing that "mechanical difficulties" would soon be resolved and the flight would be underway momentarily. After this experience, he enjoyed joking about himself as a mechanical difficulty.<sup>65</sup>

It is somewhat of a mystery how JJ managed to do all this travelling while still attending to his responsibilities in Saskatoon. A number of factors worked in his favour. First of all, his personality was such that meeting and interacting with people all day was energizing rather than

exhausting. While a more introverted individual may have been worn out by several days' of business meetings, he was not. When waiting for a flight or a train in an unfamiliar city, he would look for "Mennonite" names in the local phone directory. He would then call people, try to determine who their relatives were and, if they were known to him, inquire about their work and faith, and even pray with them! This was not a man who needed a day of solitude to regenerate after a trip. Related to this, JJ could function well with only about six hours of rest each night. It was not unusual for him to arrive in Saskatoon on Sunday morning, having taken an overnight train from Winnipeg or elsewhere, and step right into the pulpit. He could also catch a short nap in almost any setting and wake up feeling refreshed. One person who frequently travelled with him recalled that he was usually sound asleep before the aircraft was lifting off the runway.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, he could accomplish a great deal of work in a relatively short period of time—and he could do so almost anywhere. He frequently took his trusty portable typewriter on his travels so that he could work en route. Many a letter or Sunday sermon was completed during the wee hours on the train. Finally, the support of the gifted and energetic women in his life—Tina at home and Katie Hooge at the office—was also critical in enabling JJ to carry out his many responsibilities.



*In May 1955 JJ was awarded an honorary doctorate by Bethany Biblical Seminary in Chicago for his work on behalf of Mennonite refugees.*

In May 1955 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Bethany Biblical Seminary in Chicago for his work on behalf of Mennonite refugees. (Bethany was the seminary of the Church of the Brethren and was affiliated with Mennonite Biblical Seminary.) S.F. Pannabecker, who presented the award, took special note of JJ's "humanitarian service in assisting distressed souls find life in a new land."<sup>67</sup> In that way, Pannabecker summed up the driving passion behind JJ's international involvements—namely, helping those in need within the family of faith, whether they were in the Soviet Union, Europe or South America. During this postwar decade, JJ devoted enormous time and energy to aiding and advocating for the scattered brothers and sisters in the faith. But all this time he was also attending to the work within the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. We now turn to that sphere of activity.

## 9

1946–1955

### Canadian Conference Involvements

#### “Enlarge the Tents”

In July 1948 the annual sessions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) were held in Gnadenthal, Manitoba. It had been five years since JJ had assumed the role of chairperson and, as usual, he prepared the all-important “conference sermon” which was to provide inspiration for the three-day meetings. This time, he put on paper a vision which he had already been trying to implement, but which he hoped would capture the imaginations of others. Using a favourite text from Isaiah 54:2, he urged the delegates to “Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out.”

JJ used the text to call for a broader vision and an expanded conference program. He warned against the temptation to passivity and to satisfaction with customs and traditions. The church should not be on the defensive, he exhorted; rather, it should engage in a “holy offensive” of Christian activity. As Isaiah had called the people of Israel to enlarge their tents and imagine new possibilities, so he urged CMC and its member congregations to extend their ministry and witness in new directions.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Conference Context

JJ’s sermon was, in many ways, a response to a sense of discouragement and weariness that had beset the conference in previous decades. In the 1930s the Depression and the burdensome weight of the *Reiseschuld* had discouraged the conference executive from embarking on any significant new initiatives. During the war, issues related to alternative service for Mennonite men had consumed the energies of many ministers and *Ältesten*, leaving time for little else and putting a serious strain on relationships within CMC. Finally, the age and energy level of conference leadership carried over to the conference. David Toews, who served as chairperson until 1941, and Benjamin Ewert, who followed in 1942 and 1943, had both given exceptional leadership to CMC over the years; but they were now in their seventies and needed rest from their labours. Some years later, JJ was quoted as saying, “The flag of our Conference



often flew so low that it was dragging in the dirt. It was always my concern to raise it high by uniting and educating our brotherhood and sending it forth on its mission."<sup>2</sup>

From its founding in 1902, the Conference had been a rather loose federation of independent congregations. Initially, all were from Saskatchewan and Manitoba, but by 1945 they had spread from Ontario to British Columbia. Representatives of the congregations, almost always ministers and *Ältesten*, gathered annually for worship and fellowship. They also elected an executive and several committees to carry out a few projects over the course of the year. The committees included a program committee, Sunday school and youth committee, missions committee, peace committee and a committee on doctrine and conduct. There was no conference office nor paid staff, and any funds required were raised by the respective committees. Conference was a very informal affair.

At the same time, authority in the conference was highly centralized. In theory, delegates elected a chairperson, vice-chairperson and secretary annually, but in reality they returned the same small cadre of men—ministers and *Ältesten*—year after year. David Toews of Rosthern served as vice-chairperson for seven years and chairperson for 33. Benjamin Ewert, home mission worker in Winnipeg, served at various times as chairperson, vice-chairperson and secretary, for a total of 19 years. J.G. Rempel, minister at the Zoar Mennonite Church in Langham until 1935 and thereafter president of the Rosthern Bible School, filled the position of secretary continuously from 1930 to 1947. In the conference's first 50 years of existence, only 18 different men served on the three-conference executive. A mere six of these held 76 percent of all the executive positions.<sup>3</sup> As members of the inner circle, they were in a position to wield considerable influence. They were the ones who headed the various conference committees and who were elected to represent CMC in inter-Mennonite bodies like the Board of Colonization and the Mennonite Central Relief Committee.

In many ways this formal concentration of power was reinforced at more informal levels. As clergy, who could travel free on the CPR, these men were able to criss-cross the country, visit and preach in many churches and develop informal support networks. They had many opportunities to meet and confer with one another, to discuss issues of concern to the conference and to plan responses—which might or might not require delegate approval at the annual sessions. If several ministers wished to register their displeasure on a specific issue, they had ways of making their voices heard. Different authorities have used the terms "family compact"<sup>4</sup> or "ecclesiastical elite"<sup>5</sup> to describe the phenomenon whereby a relatively small group of male ministers, through formal and

informal means, controlled the conference and its affairs over many years.

At mid-century, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada was also a “cozy Saskatchewan affair.” Annual delegate sessions were held twice as often in Saskatchewan as in Manitoba. More importantly, despite the involvement of men like Benjamin Ewert of Winnipeg, the Saskatchewan ministers clearly had come to dominate the conference leadership. Until the mid-1950s, at least two and sometimes all three of the executive positions were held by men from a small area of Saskatchewan. This made it easy for the executive to meet and to make decisions, but it increasingly alienated folks from outside the province.

JJ moved into the leadership of CMC with considerable ease. Through his close association with David Toews, he had been “groomed” for the position of chairperson. The times and circumstances were such that the chairperson was regarded by others, and by himself, as a leader. Today, the chairperson functions more as a facilitator or enabler of the wishes of the delegate body. But at mid-century, it was expected and accepted that the chairperson would exercise leadership at several levels. He was expected to provide the spiritual moorings and maintain the unity and integrity of the conference. In many ways, the conference chairperson became a unifying symbol for the conference.

JJ assumed the leadership role at a time when the conference—indeed, Canadian Mennonite life as a whole—was undergoing profound transformation. Although the implications of this transformation would not really be felt until the mid-1950s, the currents of change were already at work. Mennonites were moving off the farms and into the cities in significant numbers. Both urban and rural folk were reaping the rewards of a post-war economic boom and experiencing phenomenal prosperity. More and more young people were pursuing higher education and professional vocations. English was starting to replace German as the language in the home and was making inroads into congregational life as well. Greater interaction with “non-Mennonite” Canadian society was exposing Mennonites to new ideas, lifestyles and worldviews. In other words, the walls separating Mennonites from their Canadian neighbours were rapidly being torn down. In the midst of this tremendous transformation, most Mennonites sought a path of accommodation to the larger society, even while attempting to remain true to the basic understandings of the faith and the church.<sup>6</sup>

The problem was that, even within a relatively small group such as the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, there were widely disparate views on the direction or the degree of accommodation that should be made. And there were numerous occasions where these diverse views clashed.

Frequently these conflicts were framed as theological differences, although other issues were certainly at work as well. On the one hand, some people feared that liberalism and modernism were making inroads into some congregations and educational institutions. Others felt that fundamentalism was an equally dangerous accommodation to the wider society. A clearly articulated Anabaptist theology which could have been a unifying force was lacking in the Canadian context. The result was considerable “theological confusion” and it was not always easy to find common ground.<sup>7</sup>

This then was the milieu within which JJ found himself trying to give leadership to CMC. On the one hand, he had a vision for “enlarging the tents.” On the other hand, there was tremendous internal turmoil. It was no easy matter to forge ahead with new plans and programs without precipitating a major break in the conference. But this is exactly what he aimed to do.

### **A Canadian Mennonite Bible College**

The priorities which JJ identified in 1948 as part of his enlarging-the-tent strategy were missions, relief, immigration and education. These were all personal causes which he as conference chairperson could make into conference causes. The first of these priorities—missions, relief and immigration—were “international” in scope. Thus they were dealt with in the previous chapter. As JJ saw it, education was a priority for the Canadian context, so it is dealt with here. What he had in mind, specifically, was the development of a new educational institution, namely, a Bible college.

The idea of an advanced-level Bible college for Canadian Mennonites emerged some time during the late 1930s. There was a growing sense of urgency that churches needed new ministers and that ministers needed training in Bible and theology. At the time, virtually all CMC ministers fit into two basic categories: 1) farmers who had received their training through occasional ministers’ conferences or winter Bible schools; and 2) teachers or former teachers who had gone through the *Zentralschule* in Russia. Many people still considered this level of education adequate for the needs of the churches, but a growing number did not. The winter Bible schools were taught at less than high school level, and the *Zentralschule* curriculum was intended for a very different context. At a ministers’ conference in 1937, David Toews presented a paper entitled, “Has the Time Come to Consider Establishing a School for Preachers?”<sup>8</sup> The following year at the CMC sessions there was more discussion about the “inescapable need” for a ministers’ school offering a program beyond the Bible school level.<sup>9</sup>

In 1940 JJ visited the United States at the invitation of the General Conference Home Mission Board. On his way to Henderson, Nebraska, where he was to attend sessions of the Middle district conference, he travelled to Newton, Kansas where he visited the campus of Bethel College, the GC liberal arts college. He was very much inspired by what he saw: a Mennonite college offering a post-secondary degree in Bible and theology as well as in the arts and sciences. Bethel was embroiled in controversy because some people felt it was teaching modernism and liberalism. At the Middle district sessions in Henderson, the college came under considerable attack from more conservative delegates. JJ was a guest in that setting, but he asked for the floor and came to Bethel's defence. Having witnessed the destruction of the Mennonite educational system in Russia, he urged delegates to value and support their college.<sup>10</sup>

The very next year, 1941, CMC formed a five-member standing committee to explore the issue of a "higher Bible school" for Canadian Mennonites. JJ was named chairperson. The committee's initial plan was to establish a program alongside the Rosthern Bible School, where graduates of the various CMC-related Bible schools could complete an additional year of more advanced study. But the committee could not find an individual to head up the program, someone who had necessary academic credentials, who spoke German and English and who was available. After making numerous fruitless inquiries, JJ recommended to the 1943 CMC session that the plans be dropped for the time being.

In 1945 the matter of an advanced Bible college was resurrected, and this time there was considerable urgency. Two new factors seem to have been responsible for the renaissance. First of all, the Mennonite Brethren conference had just opened a new Bible college in Winnipeg. Secondly, demobilized COs and other young people were enrolling in large numbers in the universities and in several fundamentalist post-secondary institutions. Among the church leadership, especially, there was grave concern that Mennonite students of Prairie Bible Institute or Briercrest Bible Institute would abandon the principle of nonresistance. Given the war experience, there was lost ground to recover and also a fear that students in the secular environment of the university would forsake, not only the peace position but their entire faith.

At the 1945 CMC conference new enthusiasm for a "higher Bible school" was evident and once again JJ was elected to head up a committee to make this school a reality. At this point a significantly broader vision was at work—perhaps a reflection of JJ's concern to "enlarge the tents." The new school was to be considered a college rather than a Bible school, all students were expected to have completed grade 12 (no small matter at the time), and the program was to consist of three years of study

lasting nine months each. But major obstacles needed to be overcome before the new institution, to be named Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC), was to welcome its first student. Ever the optimist, JJ's enthusiasm at times faltered as he tried to make this dream a reality.

Once again, trying to find a president proved to be the most daunting task of all. In his correspondence with Bethel College, JJ learned that CMBC would need to have a president who had at least a BD degree (Bachelor of Divinity, equivalent to a Master of Divinity today). Although by this time a number of Canadian Mennonites had completed MA degrees in various fields, no one had achieved a BD. This meant recruiting someone from the United States. Once again, there was a flurry of letter-writing as JJ searched here and there for a qualified man willing to come to Canada to head up the new institution. Time after time, the response was no. The fruitless search caused the college committee to delay the school's opening from fall 1946 to 1947, and JJ wrote in despair, "At least twenty young people were ready to attend our new school. A number of them have no doubt made their decision and registered as students in schools of other denominations. A dozen or more are still patiently waiting for our final announcement. I spent last night in prayer and meditation and was close to the stage which Elijah experienced when he said, 'It is enough, oh Lord.'"<sup>11</sup>

Eventually, individuals in both Canada and the United States encouraged JJ to assume the post of president. Both the dean and president of Bethel College, with whom JJ was in close contact, felt that he possessed the necessary "ability, wisdom and general training" and were prepared to sanction his leadership.<sup>12</sup> Even his colleagues on the board urged him to consider the position. JJ declined each appeal because he did not have the required degree; it was important to him that CMBC be headed by someone with the proper credentials.

In June 1947 JJ found someone willing to come to Canada—Arnold J. Regier. He was young (37) and he did not speak German very well, but he had completed the elusive BD degree. Additionally, Regier's wife, Helen Buhr, was from southern Manitoba; hence it was assumed that he would understand the Canadian context. JJ's original plan was that Regier would serve as a younger, academically qualified instructor, while a more senior, experienced man served as president. But by June 1947, the latter had still not been found; JJ simply informed Regier "this means that we expect you to take the lead, and are making an announcement in our papers to that effect."<sup>13</sup>

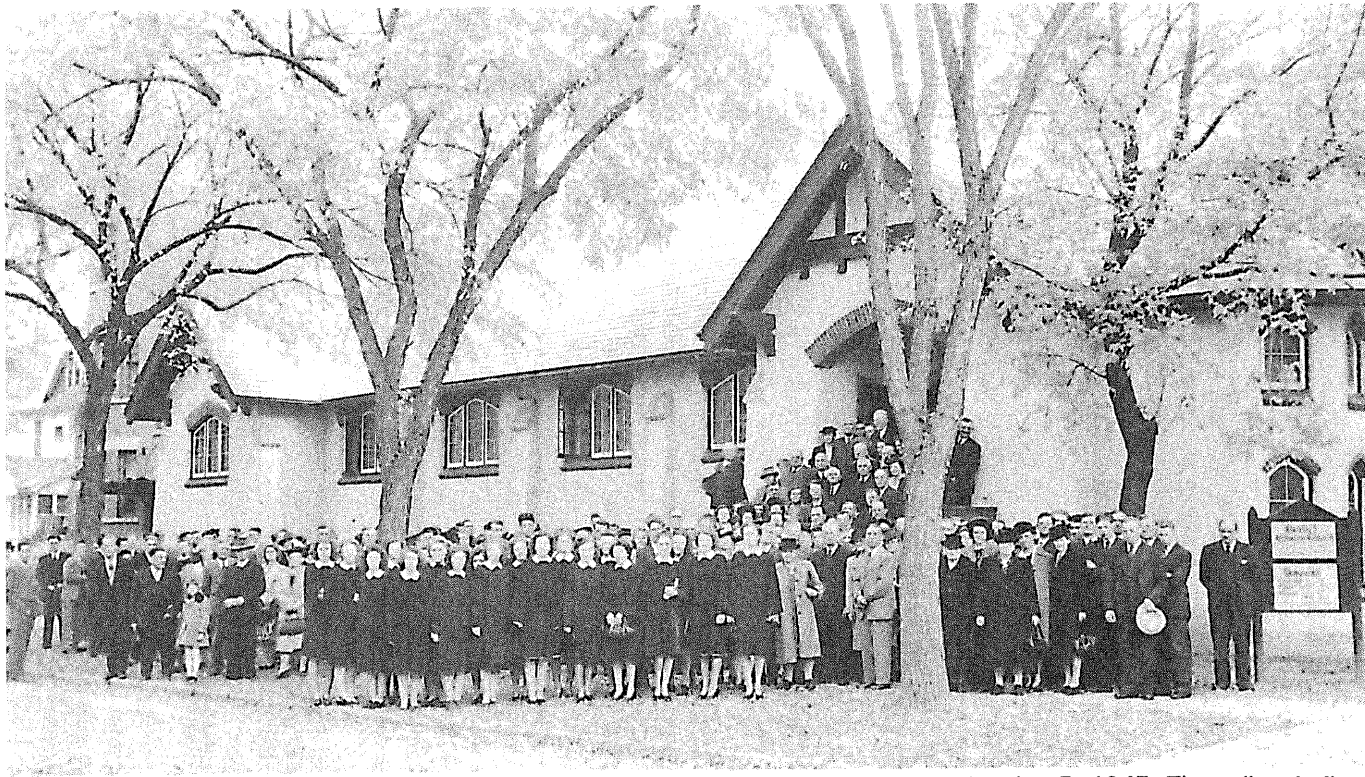
A second major difficulty for JJ and members of the CMBC committee was trying to determine a location and find a facility for the new college. In 1941 CMC delegates initially chose Rosthern and re-affirmed

this choice in 1942, 1945 and 1946. But along the way JJ entertained a variety of other ideas: Altona or Winkler in southern Manitoba, Winnipeg, Saskatoon and even Niagara Falls, Ontario. Many “political” factors needed to be considered. A southern Manitoba location could potentially build support among some of the Bergthaler ministers who often chafed over Saskatchewan’s domination of CMC affairs, but it could also be seen as a threat to the Altona Bible School and Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna. Winnipeg offered nearness to university libraries, opportunities for students to do Christian service work or to obtain part-time jobs, and a central location in terms of the east-west spread of the CMC constituency. But Winnipeg was already home to two new Mennonite institutions: Mennonite Brethren Bible College and Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute (a high school). Saskatoon offered many of the same advantages as Winnipeg without the disadvantage of the existing MB schools, but a Saskatchewan location could be interpreted by the Manitobans as another attempt by the Saskatchewan clique to consolidate its power. Niagara Falls entered the discussion when an Ontario member of the CMBC committee became aware of a suitable piece of property, but it was never a serious option—Ontario was simply not central enough.

In the end the CMBC committee decided in favour of Winnipeg, going against the stated wishes of CMC delegates. One of the important factors that seems to have tipped the scales was the availability of a desirable facility, the old Normal School. In the immediate post-war environment, suitable and available buildings were rare. A second factor was JJ’s ardent desire to gain the support of southern Manitoba ministers. Wartime tensions with the Bergthaler were still keenly felt and JJ wished as much as possible to draw them back into the conference fold. He especially wanted to counter any impression that the Saskatchewan ministers were trying to consolidate their power by establishing the college in their own province. He wrote to the Board executive,

Certain groups in Manitoba are under the impression that Rosthern wants to dominate and from time to time this feeling has hindered a close working relationship. In the end we as the Conference could remove the obstacles and win their cooperation if we explored the possibilities of locating the College in Manitoba.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant that JJ chose to throw his weight behind Winnipeg rather than Rosthern or even Saskatoon, locations that would have been to his personal advantage and the advantage of the Saskatchewan executive. In some ways he had to pay for this choice. Some Saskatche-



*Students and guests at the opening program of Canadian Mennonite Bible College on October 5, 1947. The college's first home was the basement of Bethel Mennonite Mission Church in Winnipeg. Photo: MHCA*

wan congregations were very unhappy with the reversal, and they let JJ know this in no uncertain terms. Several responded by withholding financial support for the college.<sup>15</sup> But JJ obviously had a bigger picture in mind. Behind the more explicitly stated purposes of the college—to train young people for the ministry and other areas of church work, as well as to provide a post-secondary liberal arts education in a Christian environment—was the implicit understanding that the college was to be a unifying force within the conference. In his view, locating the college in Winnipeg was a concrete way of fostering unity within the conference as a whole. If the pursuit of this larger goal ruffled some feathers in Saskatchewan, he was prepared to take the flak.

In the end, negotiations for the Normal School building fell through and the college opened in September 1947 in the renovated basement of Bethel Mennonite Mission Church in Winnipeg. The church had begun in 1937 under Benjamin Ewert as an outreach of the Manitoba, Canadian and General Conferences to Mennonites living in the city. Over the next two years discussions continued as to whether the college should make a permanent home in Winnipeg or elsewhere. That debate was effectively ended in 1949 when CMC purchased for the college a prestigious three-story 16-room house on Wellington Crescent. This was CMBC's home until 1955.

For JJ and some of the other men actively working to bring CMBC into being, the existence of an MB College goaded them along in their pursuit. Initially, however, they explored the idea of working together with the MBs in a joint endeavour. Around 1944, JJ spoke with MBBC president A.H. Unruh about this matter. Unruh's response was, "We don't care so much who carries the Ark of the Covenant, but who drives the oxen." JJ understood this to mean that CMC was welcome to send students and money to MBBC, but the MB board would retain control of policy, order and discipline.<sup>16</sup> A year or so later, I.I. Friesen of Bethel Mennonite Mission Church and an ex-officio member of the CMBC Board, approached J.B. Toews, the new MBBC president, again testing the idea of a cooperative venture. Toews was open, but support from the MBBC board was not forthcoming.<sup>17</sup>

The CMBC committee then forged ahead, eager to "catch up" with the MB college. Some members were concerned about giving the impression that only the MBs cared about the training and spiritual formation of their ministers. Johann H. Enns of the Schoenwieser Church and a member of the CMBC committee until 1945 urged JJ as follows:

Look, we must do something so that the Brethren Church cannot claim to be the only one that supports the education and preparation of



Mennonites for ministry. And even if the effort of the Brethren Church was absent, it would still be our responsibility to give young ministers every opportunity to move forward in their work.<sup>18</sup>

Others were concerned that MBBC was attracting students, as well as instructors, from CMC churches. No doubt there was also a sense of envy that the MBs were so much further ahead. By 1946, a year before CMBC even opened, MBBC already had an enrollment of 125 students, and construction of a \$50,000 dormitory was underway. At times JJ used information about the MB college to urge greater effort and support for CMBC. In 1949, for instance, he shared with the CMBC board that the MBs were constructing a \$100,000 school building with an \$8.00 per member levy.<sup>19</sup> If the MBs could do such things, surely CMC could as well.

In CMBC's first years money was very tight. Initially, it had been determined that funds for operating costs would be raised by the CMC congregations at a rate of \$1.00 per member levy. This was later raised to \$1.25 and then to \$1.50. Also, special capital projects required additional fund-raising, the first of these being the purchase of a \$10,000 house on Furby Street in Winnipeg for a women's residence. This was followed in 1949 by a \$24,000 loan for the Wellington Crescent property. Collecting this money proved difficult, particularly within Manitoba and Saskatchewan, because the CMC constituency was still largely agrarian and, when the crops were poor—as they were, particularly in 1948—congregations could not meet their obligations. A second reason is that, unlike MBBC which had a generous and wealthy patron in the person of C.A. DeFehr, CMBC had no such benefactor. A much larger factor, however, was outright opposition to the college, most of which was lodged in southern Manitoba where certain individuals and congregations had a basic distrust of the college.

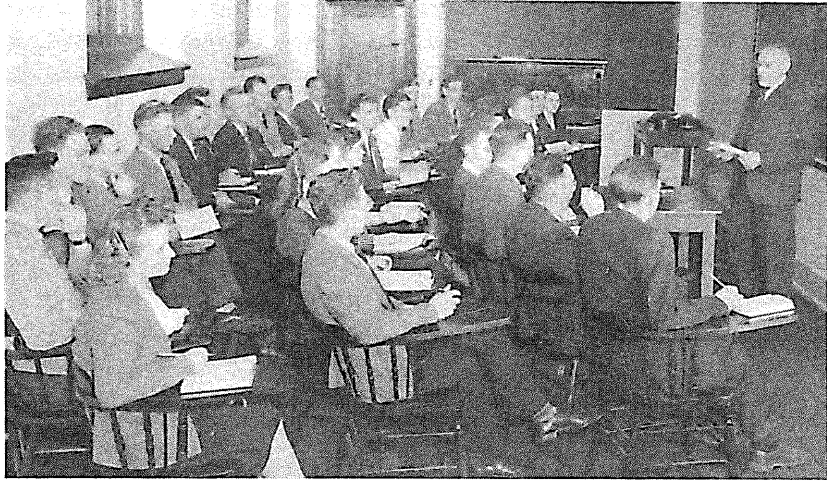
JJ, along with a few other board members, took the task of raising funds very personally. He wrote many letters to potential supporters, soliciting donations. He made personal visits to individuals who might make larger contributions. He sent out special appeals through Mennonite periodicals. In a fatherly way, he scolded conference delegates when contributions did not meet approved budgets. At the 1948 CMC sessions, he chided them as follows, "Brothers and sisters, why have you left us in the lurch? Actually, you have neglected not us but rather your own Conference child." At times, JJ's repeated requests for money were irritating to some people, since he also made frequent appeals for funds for foreign missions, relief and immigration, and aid to South America. But over time JJ's efforts helped. A major boon for the college was his

personal relationship with W.J. Douglas, manager of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in Saskatoon. They had met one morning in 1947 in a Saskatoon streetcar when JJ was pondering how to raise the \$2000 necessary for renovations to the Bethel Mission Church building. Douglas' response was, "Come, perhaps I can do something for you." Two hours later credit had been arranged. In later years, JJ repeatedly returned to Douglas for much larger loans and Douglas was always happy to oblige.<sup>20</sup>

Over time CMBC's financial picture improved somewhat, but strong reservations about the college continued among some southern Manitoba ministers. The most outspoken opponents were P.J. Schaefer, a minister in the Blumenorter Church in the Gretna-Winkler area and teacher (later principal) at Mennonite Collegiate Institute, and David Schulz, *Ältester* of the Bergthaler Church. A number of issues were at stake, but at the heart of the dispute was a concern about the basic purpose of the college. For JJ and others, the college was to fulfil two main functions: to provide training for a new generation of ministers and to offer a university-level arts education in a Christian context. The Blumenorter and Bergthaler leadership had a problem with the latter function. As they saw it, the college's sole purpose was to educate for ministry and to do so in such a way that the graduates could return to the congregations which had sent them. Thus, they were unhappy about many things they saw at the college. Too much of the instruction was in English and not enough in German, the curriculum included too many social science and other such courses, and the college seemed to be training pastors for salaried positions rather than traditional lay ministry. In addition, CMBC was too closely linked to both Bethel Mission Church (which used the English language in worship and was not considered at all representative of the rural churches) and Bethel College in Kansas.

Except for the concerns about not enough German, suspicions about the Bethel College influence were voiced with most frequency. JJ had arranged with Bethel College that graduates of the three-year program at CMBC could attend Bethel for one additional year and receive an A.B. (Bachelor of Arts) degree. Schaefer and some other Manitoba ministers felt that Bethel's basic orientation clashed with the German pietistic heritage which characterized the Russian-Mennonite churches in Canada, and that the school's English instruction and liberal theology would turn Canadian students away from the very congregations that they were to serve on completion of their training.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, fear of theological liberalism and modernism had swept through American Mennonite churches as well as the (Old) Mennonite churches of Ontario. It reached western Canadian Mennonites



*CMBC students with German instructor Henry Wall, 1948–1949. In the school's earlier years its board and faculty were criticized for not offering more of its religion courses in the German language. Photo: MHCA*

only after 1939. Among other things, liberalism argued that the theory of evolution was a truthful explanation of creation, that the Kingdom of God could be realized through human activity and that the Bible could and should be studied using methods of “higher criticism.” Modernism was a more specific movement which promoted the idea of applying scientific method to biblical and theological studies. Mennonites tended to use the terms imprecisely and interchangeably, often not fully comprehending what they meant. It has been suggested that some understood the phrase “biblical criticism” to mean criticism of the Bible, when it really referred to careful analytical study of the Bible.<sup>22</sup> But in general, what roused concerns among Mennonites about liberalism and modernism was how they seemed to undermine biblical authority. If the Genesis account of creation could no longer be accepted as written, what did this mean for the rest of the scriptures?

One of the reasons that some Mennonites found liberalism and modernism so frightening is that they had been significantly influenced by North American evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Although these two movements had not been embraced unquestioningly, many Mennonites had come to accept evangelicalism’s emphasis on personal conversion, as well as fundamentalism’s belief in the inerrancy and literal interpretation of the scriptures, even while they continued to emphasize certain Mennonite distinctives. Many were also swept along with fundamentalism’s profound distrust of all forms of liberalism and modernism.

Recently, it has been suggested that the heart of the modernist-fundamentalist debate for Mennonites was not theology, but rather different understandings of the direction and the degree that Mennonites were prepared to accommodate to the larger society. Charges of theological unorthodoxy often went hand in hand with concerns over incursions of the English language, urbanized and worldly lifestyles and a professional ministry. At a time when Mennonites were undergoing rapid social change and the fear of assimilation was real, a fundamentalist orientation provided a way “to codify doctrine, reassert churchly authority and redefine cultural boundaries”—in other words, a way to bolster the church against that change.

In many ways, CMBC president Arnold Regier became the scapegoat for many of the concerns about the college. He did not have sufficient facility in the German language, he was an American and even a Bethel College graduate, he was too interested in building the “secular” component of the curriculum and he was suspected of harbouring modernist sympathies. Some people also took issue with his teaching methods—he preferred a seminar and discussion format over the traditional lecture style. Others felt the college president should outline and enforce a strict behaviour code for students, whereas Regier’s approach was to have the student council draw up the guidelines. There was unhappiness that unchaperoned dating and attendance at “commercial entertainments and amusements” were not completely forbidden at CMBC, as they were at the MB college.

CMBC Board member P. J. Schaefer registered his concerns about the college with JJ on numerous occasions during the school’s first year. At the 1948 CMC annual sessions he critiqued the school publicly. As CMBC board chair, JJ responded with three main points: 1) there was a new commitment that 50 percent of the courses would be taught in the German language; 2) the college was in no way under the management of Bethel College, although individuals at Bethel had been consulted and wisdom gained from Bethel’s 70 years of history considered; and 3) Canadian Mennonite young people were asking for a place where they could pursue a higher education but in a Christian context.<sup>23</sup>

JJ chose not to respond publicly to the specific charge that the college was teaching unorthodox theology, although he issued a strong indictment of modernism the following year at Sardis, B.C. In between those two conference sessions, JJ wrote a letter to his friend Ältester Wilhelm Enns of Springstein who shared some of Schaefer’s concerns about the theological bent of the college. JJ emphasized that the college did not hold to modernist or liberal theology, and he defended Regier as a man with a child-like faith. But he also insisted that “when we are strong and

united, Modernism is not a danger to us.” Moreover, “even if we released Teacher Regier today, tomorrow another reason undermining rather than supporting the school would emerge. Also, even if our brothers who have and have earned the name Fundamentalist were responsible for the curriculum, for hiring teachers, etc., Satan would not hesitate to oppose the work of our Lord.”<sup>24</sup> JJ evidently saw fundamentalism as posing as great a danger to the college as liberalism and modernism, and he hoped that CMBC could chart a theological course that represented an alternative to both streams.

It is significant that he chose to share this insight in a private letter rather than a more public context. One reason for this may have been that he could not express the alternative clearly enough. He was, after all, not a theologian. While more educated than many CMC ministers, he was not equipped to formulate and interpret a Mennonite theology that could respond to modernism without embracing fundamentalism. He was not alone. There was, within CMC and other Canadian Mennonite conferences, considerable “theological confusion” at this time. JJ reflected some of this confusion, even while recognizing it and hoping that CMBC would provide the necessary antidote.

Perhaps a more important reason he kept his critique of fundamentalism to private letters was his own political astuteness. He was deeply concerned that the rifts which had shaken the conference during the war not be replicated. He knew that in order for CMBC to succeed, it was important to rally the support of southern Manitoba ministers, many of whom were quite fundamentalist in their orientation. Thus, in the interests of the larger cause, he was prepared to keep quiet on certain issues.

In response to the criticism aimed at the college, the board and faculty made some changes early on. They increased the amount of classroom instruction done in the German language. They also dropped some arts courses and increased their offerings in the areas of Bible and theology. However, this was not enough and the censure continued, most of it focused on the person of Arnold Regier. Things came to a head early in 1950 when a group of ministers from the Blumenorter Church submitted an ultimatum to the CMBC board. Their continued spiritual and financial support, they insisted, hinged on definite changes in the areas of language and leadership.<sup>25</sup> JJ and members of the CMBC board obviously felt that some decisive action was necessary. They decided to offer the position of president of the college to P.J. Schaefer, who just recently had been appointed new principal of Mennonite Collegiate Institute.<sup>26</sup> Schaefer was a gifted and educated man, but he was also a minister in the Blumenorter Church and one of the college’s strongest critics. Thus, the “political” motives behind the board’s action were obvious. Unfortu-

nately, word of the offer to Schaefer leaked out, and Arnold Regier learned of it from sources other than JJ, the board chairperson.

Initially, JJ had placed full trust in Regier and encouraged others to do so as well but, as time passed, their relationship had become strained. JJ was concerned about tension within the faculty and seemed to place at least some of the blame on Regier. He was upset when members of the faculty became embroiled in the conflict with the Schoenwieser congregation (more about that below). He was also quite hurt when Regier invited someone else to spend a week at the college counselling the students—JJ saw this as his prerogative. Regier, on the other hand, was frustrated that JJ did not always keep him informed of developments at the board level (around 1946 the CMBC committee came to be called a board).<sup>27</sup> It was awkward and embarrassing for him when he learned of important decisions from other faculty members or even students! Ironically, the president did not attend board meetings, although faculty member I.I. Friesen did.

As it turned out, P.J. Schaefer did not accept the presidency in 1950. He had laid out two conditions for his acceptance: the termination of Regier and two other younger faculty members, and assurance that all students would be fully proficient in German upon their graduation.<sup>28</sup> JJ, and presumably the majority of board members, felt that was going too far. They were prepared to ask for Regier's resignation as president, but not as an instructor. Neither would they agree to Schaefer's other conditions. Some board members clearly felt that Schaefer's views on the language question were outdated. Many of the students coming to the college knew very little German at all; to expect them to become proficient over a three-year period was unrealistic.<sup>29</sup>

For the 1950–1951 school year, I.I. Friesen acted as president while Regier continued on as a full-time faculty member. Regier and his wife Helen spent the following year in Europe so that Arnold could continue his studies. While he was there, the college board determined that he would not be offered another year of teaching upon his return (faculty members were appointed on a year-to-year basis), and JJ informed him of this in a brief letter. The main reason given was “continued opposition to your appointment, particularly from large sections in Manitoba.” The news came as a terrible blow to both Arnold and Helen Regier. To replace Regier, the board hired Gerhard Lohrenz, a minister in the Springstein Church who had been teaching at the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute for a number of years. Hiring Lohrenz was clearly intended to rally the support of the Bergthaler and Blumenortler ministers.

After Regier's departure, the voices of opposition to the college were muted for a time. What is significant about the tumultuous beginnings of

the college is that they demonstrate JJ's attempts, as chairperson of the college as well as the conference, to chart a course that would appeal to as broad a cross-section of the constituency as possible. Most of all, he wanted CMBC to be an institution that both young and old could support. He was cognizant of the way Mennonites were being drawn into mainstream Canadian society, and he was aware of the wide range of responses to that trend. If others saw this divergence as one between modernism and "true faith," JJ saw it more as a generational divide, with young and old holding to vastly different notions about how to accommodate to the larger society. In his view, neither old nor young possessed the full answer. The future, he felt, lay not in a rigid traditionalism and cloistered separation, nor in an unabashed assimilation into the secular world. Rather, it lay in using some of the means of the wider society—namely, an institution of higher education—to preserve and strengthen the faith.

Unfortunately, the founding of the college forced JJ to choose between individual and collective good—between standing behind Arnold Regier and building a base of support for CMBC. Individual people had always been important to JJ. He had long prized the motto he learned in teacher's college, "to individualize and not to generalize." But in the role of conference and college chairperson, his own predisposition clashed with the needs of the institution. When a middle ground could not be found, he chose what was good for the institution rather than the individual. Thus, Arnold Regier was dismissed so that the college could move forward.

Despite its turbulent beginnings, the college brought JJ much joy. He had always had a warm spot in his heart for young people, and at CMBC he especially enjoyed his interactions with students. Each fall he made the trip to Winnipeg to attend the college's opening program and to meet privately with each student who desired such a meeting. In a small prayer room, he learned the student's name, where she came from and who her relatives were and, in his pastoral way, he encouraged and prayed with her. As students neared graduation, he counselled them on future options, encouraging many to enter pastoral ministry or foreign missions. Once he got to know them, he did not forget them. He maintained this practice of ministering to the students for many years.

Many aspects of college life gave JJ much satisfaction, even though he was not directly involved. The music program was one example. From the beginning, music was an important component of the college curriculum as well its extracurricular program. Instruction was given in piano, violin and voice, with emphasis on traditional church music and works of classical composers like Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. Throughout the

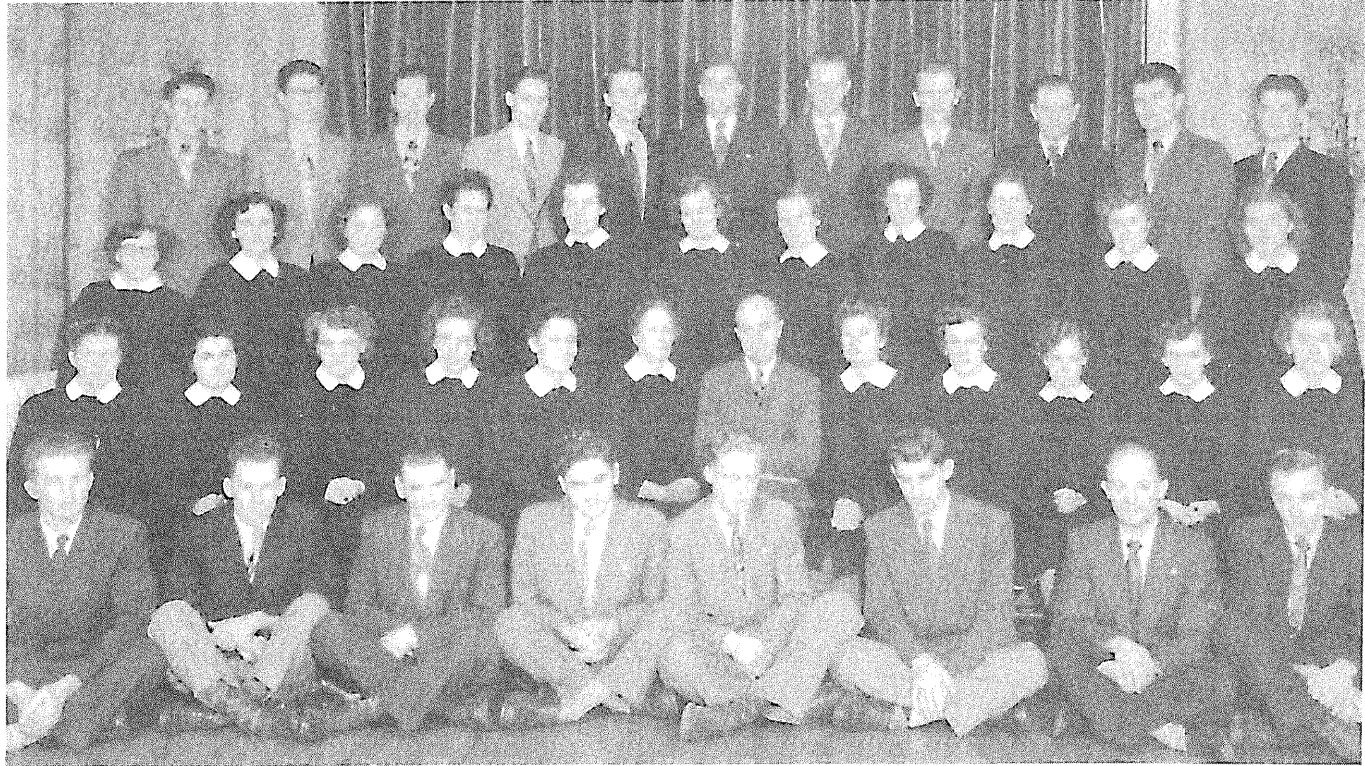
school year, students performed at various recitals and the community choir gave a public concert. During the college's first year, Arnold Re-gier suggested the formation of an octette that could visit CMC churches as ambassadors for the school. During that first year, the group travelled to Saskatchewan in a rented hearse.<sup>30</sup> The octette proved to be so successful in winning the support of skeptics that it quickly became a tradition.

Despite cramped facilities, a small library and many other drawbacks, student life at the college was rich and wholesome. A social committee organized volleyball games, skating outings and a Christmas banquet. A literary society held regular poetry readings and debates and, once a year, presented a play. A deputational committee arranged for students to visit the sick in several Winnipeg hospitals or to teach Sunday school in a mission outreach in St. Vital. An active student council planned weekly prayer meetings and served as a liaison between the student body and administration, besides fostering leadership skills. In 1953 a group of students formed a special peace team which toured Manitoba churches and encouraged commitment to the peace principle. Apart from all the organized programs and activities, the college quickly became a place where students found their life partner and sometimes was jokingly referred to as "Canadian Mennonite Bridal College."

JJ was encouraged to see the college grow slowly but steadily and to fulfil the main purpose for which it was created. It opened in 1947 with 23 students; by 1955 this number had grown to 80. In 1950 the first group of 12 students graduated, 11 of whom were soon involved in full-time Christian service.<sup>31</sup> In the next decade the percentage of CMBC graduates moving into full-time church work within a short time after graduation dropped below 60 percent only once. Despite all the difficulties, CMBC was indeed meeting the hopes of its founders.

JJ loved to dream about the future possibilities of the college, and he was usually a few steps ahead of those around him. While others were still worried about the appropriateness of social science courses, he was already thinking about gaining university accreditation for these subjects. The college had barely moved into the building on Wellington Crescent when JJ was envisioning the construction of a large auditorium nearby. No sooner had the conference approved plans for the purchase of a 20-acre campus in the Tuxedo area of the city, then he was already planning for a new school building and dormitory. And, while others bemoaned the lack of highly educated Canadian faculty, he was scheming ways that CMBC could financially support a promising young man from Alberta, Henry Poettcker, so that he could obtain his PhD.





*The CMBC choir with conductor John Konrad in 1951. Music was an important component of the college from its beginning and was an aspect of college life that gave J.J. Thiessen a great deal of satisfaction. Photo: MHCA*

### **The Winnipeg Controversy**

The controversy related to the formation of CMBC was by no means the only one which shook the Conference of Mennonites in Canada during this period. Of the many others, the most significant, and the one which was not unrelated to the unfolding developments at CMBC, revolved around Ältester Johann H. Enns of the Schoenwieser Mennonite Church of Winnipeg. It became known as the “Winnipeg controversy.”<sup>32</sup> One historian has referred to this conflict as “one of the saddest and most ugly episodes in the story of the Manitoba and Canadian Conferences.”<sup>33</sup> As conference chairperson JJ was caught in the midst of the controversy. And in this instance he seemed to defy his own vision for “enlarging the tents.”

At issue were some of Johann Enns’ theological views. In the fall of 1944 he had presented a paper at a Manitoba ministers’ conference on 16th-century Anabaptist leader, Hans Denck. Denck had struggled with the contradiction between the biblical images of a loving and gracious God and the Christian teaching that this same God would condemn people to eternal punishment in hell. Eventually he had come to believe that God would extend a pardon to all. Enns’ exposition on Denck suggested to a number of his Manitoba colleagues that he (Enns) subscribed to this highly controversial doctrine of universalism. In their view, universalism constituted a grave deviation from biblical truth and a dangerous flirtation with modernism. At the 1945 CMC sessions in Eigenheim, Saskatchewan, they demanded a special meeting be held to discuss Enns’ views. As chairperson, JJ tried to postpone the matter, but the concerned group was insistent. With very little time to prepare, Enns was called into a special session and was questioned about his views. At the end of the meeting, a lengthy resolution was passed, sharply criticizing the doctrine of universalism and any ministers who held to it.

The situation polarized very quickly in the weeks following Eigenheim. Enns was highly respected amongst his fellow ministers and colleagues in and around Winnipeg and dearly loved within his own congregation. His supporters were deeply upset by the Eigenheim resolution and sprang to Enns’ defense. A gathering of Schoenwieser-related ministers and other supportive pastors prepared its own resolution and forwarded it to the CMC executive. Many members of the congregation wrote letters on Enns’ behalf, as individuals and as a group.

On the other side, J.G. Rempel, secretary of CMC, responded by publishing a blistering indictment of universalism—and by inference, the views of Johann Enns—in three different Mennonite periodicals. According to Rempel, universalism was the first step down the slippery slope of modernism and it must be roundly condemned.<sup>34</sup> This was

followed by more letters from Enns' supporters, some of which were very inflammatory and did not help matters for the beleaguered *Ältester*, and which elicited another vigorous response from Rempel. Late in the year, the Schoenwieser church council served notice that it was choosing to withdraw from the Conference of Mennonites in Canada as well as from the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba. A last minute attempt by Rempel to effect a reconciliation with the Schoenwieser was declined because of Rempel's insistence that there be no theological compromise. A special meeting held in Winnipeg in June 1946—one person referred to it as J.H. Enns' "trial"<sup>35</sup>—only served to heighten the tensions. A month later, the CMC sessions in Beamsville, Ontario, passed a resolution which explicitly repudiated universalism and declared unwelcome in the conference those churches, or its leaders, who deviated from this stance. This constituted a formal break between the Schoenwieser Church and CMC.

If universalism seems to have been the nail upon which the disagreement with the Schoenwieser Mennonite Church hung, other issues also entered the fray. In general, Enns' opponents felt he was too ready to entertain questions about accepted biblical "truths." They claimed he considered some of the hymns of the church as being divinely inspired. They feared Enns was leading youth astray with his tolerant and liberal views. Besides concerns about Enns, people also talked about the "lax" spiritual life of the congregation, and the fact that some members were known to drink alcohol and to dance.

There are a variety of ways of interpreting the conflict between the conferences, on the one hand, and Johann Enns and the Schoenwieser Church, on the other. One view regards the conflict as symptomatic of the growing gulf between rural and urban congregations, with the rural representing traditionalism and legalism and the urban representing openness and tolerance.<sup>36</sup> In other words, this was another situation where different understandings of and approaches to accommodation with the wider society clashed. Others have argued that the real issue was personal ambition and jealousy, with various individuals, including J.G. Rempel and Johann Enns, aspiring to greater leadership within the conference. Rempel, it was felt by some, was vying to succeed David Toews as *Ältester* of the Rosenorter Church, and hoped to gain stature and prestige by establishing himself as a defender of orthodoxy. On the other side, it was suspected that Enns was interested in heading up the new Bible college. At the time Enns was the leading instructor in the Winnipeg Bible school and would have been a likely candidate.<sup>37</sup> A related view holds that the conflict was really a power struggle between the Saskatoon-Rosthern *Ältesten* who ran the conference and some of

their Winnipeg counterparts. There was growing resistance within Winnipeg to the Saskatchewan clique that had held control of conference affairs for too long. Even though not all the Winnipeg ministers shared Enns' doctrinal views, they resisted the heavyhandedness of the Saskatchewan executive.<sup>38</sup>

As chairperson of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, JJ found himself in the midst of the conflict and in opposition to Johann Enns. Nevertheless, it was J.G. Rempel, the conference secretary, who took the upper hand in representing the conference's position vis-à-vis Enns. Typically, this would have been the chairperson's role. Why the reversal in this situation? Was it because Rempel had served on the conference executive since 1930, whereas JJ was a relative newcomer? Was it because Rempel, as Rosthern Bible School teacher, was the "leading" theologian, outside of the suspect CMBC faculty? Was it because JJ was intimidated by the forceful and outspoken Rempel who came from a prestigious Chortitza family and who had attained a high rank in the *Sanitätsdienst* in Russia? Was it because JJ preferred not to be seen as a hardliner and therefore allowed Rempel to do "the dirty work"? We can only speculate.

If JJ preferred to be seen as somewhat more conciliatory than Rempel, he nevertheless took the position that acceptance of the doctrine of universalism was akin to embracing modernism. As he wrote in a letter to Benjamin Ewert about the Winnipeg controversy, "It has to do with our position on the inspiration of God's Word, on miracles in general and the miracle of our Saviour's birth in particular, and on the teaching of salvation. If our position is firm and basic, then why are we arguing? . . . Our Conference rejects modernism, whether it has its roots in Saskatoon, Rosthern, Newton or Winnipeg."<sup>39</sup> He repeated these words in letters to other ministers and *Ältesten*.

Prior to the breakdown, JJ and Enns had been good friends who held much in common. They had known each other as fellow teachers in Russia, Johann having graduated from the Halbstadt pedagogical program just a few years before JJ. In Canada, both men had been called to the ministry and eventually ordained as *Ältesten* of urban congregations. Each of them also had special responsibilities related to the *Mädchenheim* in their respective cities. Enns served as spiritual advisor or chaplain to the Winnipeg home, although he was not also a housefather in the way JJ was in Saskatoon. In addition, JJ and Johann worked together on a variety of conference committees—the Sunday school committee, the program committee, and the committee charged with establishing a Bible college. For a number of years they had even served together on the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization.

The conflict between the Schoenwieser Church and the conference led to a painful break between the two men. JJ claimed to have nothing against Enns personally, although he was angered by the actions of some of Enns' church members. But Enns clearly felt betrayed by JJ and by J.G. Rempel. He was deeply hurt that his honest and sincere desire to search for understanding had been silenced so unequivocally. It caused him great pain that, if the two men regarded him as a wayward brother, they had not come to him personally and given him counsel, rather than choosing such public means as the widely read Mennonite newspapers to call him to account.<sup>40</sup> The three men did meet and converse a while later at meetings of the Board of Colonization, but they could come to no resolution.

Enns was not the only one disappointed in Thiessen and Rempel. David Toews was also rather disillusioned, especially by Rempel's articles. He confided to Enns, "I fear that the Conference cannot be a blessing if some of its leading men deal in such a loveless manner."<sup>41</sup> There was even unhappiness in JJ's congregation in Saskatoon. P.D. Willms, one of First Mennonite's charter and leading members, had relatives in the Schoenwieser Church in Winnipeg and he shared their view that Enns had been treated unjustly. A long-time CPR employee, Willms was a man who chafed under the leadership and authority given to ministers. Over this issue, he wrote to Johann Enns, "I firmly believe that we lay people dare not remain silent when we see the injustice, the intolerance and the illusions of papal megalomania hidden under the cloak of religion."<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, many people supported the conference leadership. This is illustrated by the fact that the 1946 Beamsville resolution condemning universalism passed by a vote of 369 to 23. In addition to numerous letters coming to Enns' defence, JJ and J.G. Rempel also received much correspondence from individuals who affirmed the conference stance and its manner of dealing with the situation. Some even felt that the Schoenwieser Church was receiving its due. There were also those individuals who opposed the doctrine of universalism but desired a less divisive way of dealing with the controversial issue. One of these was Wilhelm Enns, a younger brother to Johann Enns and *Altester* of the Springstein Mennonite Church in Manitoba. Wilhelm held to more conservative views than his older brother and aligned himself with the conference position, but he clearly felt that Rempel's public articles were out of order.<sup>43</sup> Another minister who fell into this camp was Benjamin Ewert. As a conference-supported city mission worker who pastored Bethel Mennonite Mission Church in Winnipeg, Ewert was troubled about the serious fragmentation of CMC work in Winnipeg.

About two years after the Beamsville conference, the Church Unity Committee of the General Conference Mennonite Church approached the various parties in the interest of mediating a reconciliation. (The Schoenwieser congregation had retained membership in the General Conference throughout this whole period.) There was some fear, on the part of J.G. Rempel in particular, that the committee was predisposed to favour the Schoenwieser perspective, but a process of dialogue was initiated, culminating in a special meeting in March 1949.<sup>44</sup> At that meeting Enns was asked to accept all the conference statements, including the Beamsville one condemning universalism. Enns was more inclined to appeal to the incompleteness of human knowledge and the profound mystery of God. But this was not good enough for the group assembled. After lengthy and difficult discussion, Enns finally agreed to accept the statements. All present were invited to stand to indicate their willingness to once again work together. The minutes note that no voice spoke against the resolution.<sup>45</sup> In July of that year, at the CMC annual sessions in Sardis, B.C., the Schoenwieser congregation was welcomed back into the conference fold.

Pockets of resistance to Enns remained in Manitoba, a sentiment evident at the March meeting although it was not reflected in the minutes.<sup>46</sup> No one had spoken out against the final resolution at the meeting, but two people remained seated when the remainder of the gathering rose in support.<sup>47</sup> According to one source, some of the ministers present had demanded a formal apology and admission of error from Enns. This was rejected as out of order by representatives of the Church Unity Committee because Enns' views had been honestly and sincerely held. One Manitoba minister resigned from all his conference committee positions in protest. It took many years for a reconciliation to take place between the Manitoba Conference on the one hand and Enns and his congregation on the other. In 1968 the Schoenwieser Church, by then known as First Mennonite Church, was re-admitted to the Manitoba Conference.<sup>48</sup> JJ's role in the Winnipeg controversy situation is somewhat confusing. Given his penchant for mediation and moderation, he took an unusually strong position against the views of his friend and colleague, Johann Enns. One wonders why he did not try to encourage more dialogue initially, or why he did not try to dissuade J.G. Rempel from publishing his polarizing articles. Perhaps he was concerned about the future of CMBC, still not fully operating. He needed the support of the southern Manitoba ministers for the college to succeed; any sign of theological fudging could mean disaster for the college. Perhaps JJ was threatened about Enns' supposed aspirations for leadership of the college and this was a way of "sidelining" him. Whatever the motivation, JJ once

again put what he perceived as the needs of conference (and possibly the college) ahead of the needs of an individual. Moreover, he seemed to defy his own vision for “enlarging the tents.” Evidently, when he spoke of a wider vision for the conference, he did not mean a broader and more tolerant theology.

If JJ took a rather rigid position publicly, behind the scenes he tried to do “damage control.” He refused to call Enns a heretic or to malign him personally, and he chose not to respond to caustic attacks aimed at him by some of Enns’ supporters. He also worked for reconciliation behind the scenes. Unlike J.G. Rempel, JJ welcomed the involvement of the General Conference Unity Committee and encouraged Rempel to cooperate with it. He also urged the Manitoba Conference to work toward its own rapprochement with the Schoenwieser.

JJ and Johann Enns made peace with each other soon after the 1949 CMC action. By the fall of that year they had resumed friendly correspondence on a variety of issues and seem to have forgiven each other. About two years later, when JJ made arrangements for the GC Council of Boards to hold meetings in the Schoenwieser facilities, one of Enns’ sons spoke harshly to JJ. The son still harboured hard feelings about the Winnipeg controversy and the treatment his father had received. Enns nevertheless quickly wrote to JJ, apologizing for his son and indicating that the son “was not ‘in the know’ about how you and I actually relate to each other.”<sup>49</sup> He also took the opportunity to invite JJ to come and preach in his church. JJ responded, “I harbour no resentment against the younger brother because for years I have considered all back-stabbing to be part of suffering and under the leading of God.”<sup>50</sup>

JJ encountered other conflicts in his work with the conference, although none as major as the Winnipeg Controversy. As conference chairperson he frequently found himself drawn into disputes, whether he wished to be or not. In Winnipeg there were tensions when CMC commissioned a new city mission specifically for recently arrived Mennonite refugees from Europe. (This mission eventually became known as Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church.) Both the Bethel Mission Church and the Schoenwieser Church felt that the newcomers should worship with them.<sup>51</sup> In Rosemary, Alberta, the Westheimer Mennonite Church split when a group within the congregation charged one of the lay ministers with too accepting an attitude toward “lax social and moral standards.”<sup>52</sup> In British Columbia, two important congregations, West Abbotsford Mennonite Church and Eden Mennonite Church (Chilliwack), withdrew from the B.C. conference over concerns that the conference was not placing enough emphasis on conversion and holy living.<sup>53</sup> In each of these disputes, JJ tried to play a mediating and

moderating role between groups that found it difficult to work and worship together. He wished to avoid exacerbating the divisions and therefore tried to act as impartially as he could.

### **A Benevolent Autocrat**

Establishing CMBC and mediating conflicts within and among congregations were not the only tasks that occupied JJ as CMC chairperson. One of his more visible functions was to preside over the annual delegate sessions each July. In between annual conferences, he worked with the program committee to ensure the other committees were carrying out their assignments and to plan the agenda for the next sessions. As conference chairperson, he was called on to preach and to officiate at special events such as ordinations, mission festivals, church dedications and anniversaries. This necessitated considerable travel back and forth across the country. JJ also carried on voluminous correspondence with ministers and *Ältesten* from Ontario to British Columbia, answering their questions and counselling them in their respective ministries. In many ways, he combined the functions that are today divided between moderator, executive secretary and conference minister.

Many people who witnessed JJ in action at CMC functions would remember him best simply for his commanding presence. With his straight and upright bearing, his black suit and tie and his evident self-assurance, he was an imposing figure. This sense of command was reinforced by Tina who often accompanied him to annual meetings. She wore earrings, lipstick and stylish dresses; she cut and curled her hair long before the wives of other CMC ministers did so. Some people found Tina's "worldliness" inappropriate. Soon after a photo of JJ and Tina appeared in *Der Bote*, JJ received a letter from a fellow minister who was offended by Tina's earrings.<sup>54</sup> But for others, Tina represented a sense of dignity and "class" which they quite admired. Still healthy and energetic in their mid-fifties, JJ and Tina made a striking couple.

JJ would also be remembered for the way he led the discussions and proceedings at the annual CMC meetings. Over his many years of leadership in a variety of contexts, he had developed a very keen sense of group dynamics and could "read" a gathering well. He used this ability to guide discussions and decisions in the direction he thought appropriate, employing a variety of techniques to do so. For instance, if there was disagreement over a particular motion on the floor—one that JJ himself supported—he would wait until several persons had spoken favourably for the motion and at that moment he would call for a vote. If there was stalemate on a particular issue and he wanted some definitive action, he would call on a close friend, such as his colleague Wilhelm Enns of





*JJ and Tina in the 1950s. Some people found Tina's earrings objectionable.*

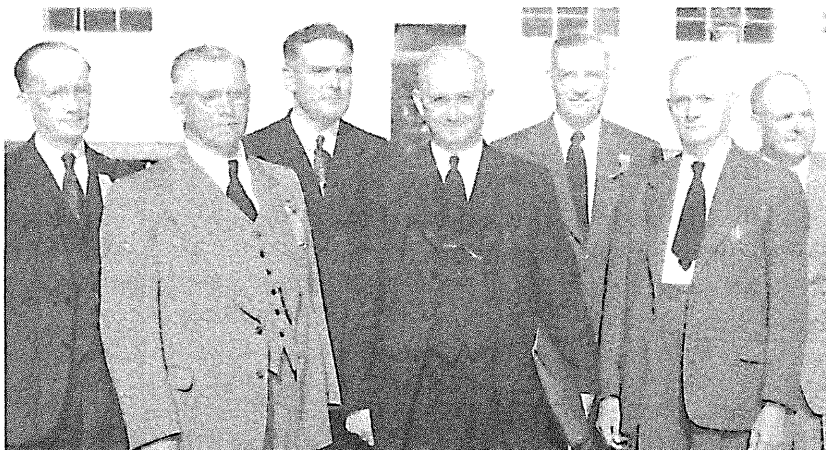
Springstein, for a motion, knowing that Enns would offer something that would be to his (JJ's) liking. Or JJ might even say to the gathered delegates, "Now if I were sitting down there, I would make the following motion . . ." and would then read a motion that he had prepared in advance. One of his colleagues would take this as his cue to say, "I so move," and the decision would be made to JJ's satisfaction. Sometimes, if there were moments of tension or difficulty in the proceedings, as there frequently were, he would call for a song or a coffee break or a time of prayer to ease the level of anxiety in the room. It was said that there were few times when conference business did not go as JJ wished. In 1952, John Thiessen (no relation to JJ) of the General Conference Foreign Mission Board attended the 50th anniversary celebrations of CMC in Gretna, Manitoba. Regarding JJ's leadership of the meeting, he wrote to his colleagues as follows:

Our dear brother, J.J. Thiessen, was chairman, and a "shrewd" (in the best sense of this word) chairman he is. How keenly and quickly he detects that fire might break out, and he quickly "pours water" over it. He was again re-elected and wisely so."<sup>55</sup>

Another way JJ could influence conference decisions was through appointments. As conference chairperson, it was his prerogative to name persons to both the nominations committee and the resolutions commit-

tee. The former was responsible for bringing forward a slate of candidates for all other conference committees (Sunday school, youth work, doctrine and conduct, missions, etc.); the latter had the task of preparing major resolutions for approval at annual sessions. The nominations committee in particular was an important one, and quite likely JJ had “suggestions” of names to fill the various slots. Not that he was eager to surround himself with only supporters—he was much too astute a politician for that. One of the ways he sought to build support for and unity within the conference was by giving responsibility to some of the disgruntled voices. It is probably no accident that men like P.J. Schaefer and David Schulz, who were strongly critical of CMBC and its aims, found themselves on the CMBC board for many years.

The manner in which JJ operated as conference chairperson would today be considered manipulative and autocratic. And indeed, some harboured those sentiments even at this time. H.T. Klaassen, minister at the Eigenheim Mennonite Church and conference secretary from 1948 to 1954, was one person who sometimes bristled under JJ’s leadership. From time to time, JJ would advise Klaassen how to write the minutes of meetings. Klaassen found this most irritating; he also resented being treated as JJ’s “choreboy.”<sup>56</sup> As the 1950s wore on, more voices began to speak out, perhaps not so much against JJ himself as against a system which allowed men like him to hold so much power. But for the most part, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was still fairly widespread



*The Conference of Mennonites in Canada executive and Program Committee in 1952 (left to right): J.A. Dyck, H.T. Klaassen, Paul Schroeder, J.J. Thiessen, G.G. Neufeld, Jacob Gerbrandt, Johann J. Sawatzky. Photo: MHCA*

acceptance of JJ's style. People expected leaders to lead. They also trusted leaders to act in the best interests of the conference. JJ met those expectations, at least most of the time. The terms "benevolent patriarch" or "benevolent autocrat" provide a fairly accurate description of him and his *modus operandi*.

### **Growth at First Mennonite Church**

The theme of "enlarging the tents" guided JJ's leadership of CMC in the late 1940s and 1950s. It also directed his ministry at First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon. This time of tremendous growth and expansion for the congregation, in size and in program, was a reflection of the increasing urbanization of prairie society, including the Mennonite population. In the post-war years, rural Mennonites, among other peoples, began to flock to the cities. Scores of young men enrolled at the University of Saskatchewan, while an increasing number of women from rural areas began teacher and nurses training at the Normal School and St. Paul's Hospital, respectively. When they graduated, these young adults tended to take professional jobs in Saskatoon. Increased industrial production, driven by the post-war economic boom, drew many Mennonite young people and families to the city as well. Also among those finding employment in Saskatoon factories were Mennonite refugee immigrants, most of them women. In 1941, there were 871 Mennonites in Saskatoon; by 1951 that number had doubled to 1663; and in the next decade it would increase to 4765. Until 1961 Saskatoon would hold the distinction of having the third highest urban concentration of Mennonites in Canada.

The growth at First Mennonite—"Thiessen's church" as it was frequently nicknamed—mirrored the trends in the wider society and within the Mennonite community. Although the congregation had grown steadily throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, the pace of growth picked up after the war. Between 1945 and 1955, the number of baptized members rose from 193 to 303. Even more telling is the average number of persons attending worship; it grew from under 300 to over 500. In the same decade, the number of children attending Sunday school more than doubled.<sup>57</sup> By the mid-1950s the small church building constructed in 1936 was more than full and each Sunday people were turned away from Sunday worship. In 1954 a new lot at the corner of Queen and Fifth Street was purchased as the site for a new church building.

With the energy of new people, more church programs were begun alongside the existing Sunday school program, *Jugendverein* (now known as Christian Endeavour), *Frauenverein* (women's group) and choirs. These new initiatives included: boys' and girls' clubs, a men's

group, a new women's group and a formal young people's program. As usual, JJ had a role in the establishment of most of these new programs, even the women's group. The initial *Frauenverein* had been organized in 1931 and it continued. The newer group was intended for a younger generation of women and was named the Naomi Mission Society. JJ took a special interest in the men's group, organized in 1952, to assist with various needs in the congregation. He was aware of the many ways that the women supported and undergirded the work of the church and he hoped the men's group would do the same. The young people's program quickly became a thriving event, drawing 60 or 70 post-high school youth to its weekly gatherings.

During this decade First Mennonite also initiated a new community outreach alongside its ongoing ministry in Pleasant Hill. The new ministry was in the Mayfair district on the northern edge of the city. For a number of years already, JJ had been invited to minister in Mayfair, but he had declined because the MB Church had an outreach program there. When the MBs withdrew, he began to make home visitations in the district and recruited others to lead Bible studies and teach Sunday school. The idea of establishing a separate Mayfair congregation with its own Sunday worship was greeted with some concern by the First Mennonite *Bruderschaft* because of the prospect of losing members to this new group. A decision would likely have been postponed had it not been for the donation of a church building to CMC for the purpose of furthering mission work in Saskatoon. After three separate meetings—seemingly skilfully led by JJ—a decision was made to proceed. The new church building, which was moved from Langham “through ditches, over fields and under telephone wires,” was dedicated in December 1949 as Mayfair Mennonite Mission. Peter G. Sawatzky, a member of the first CMBC graduating class, came to serve the group as minister, although many people from First Mennonite continued to help out in many ways. Mayfair was formally organized as an independent local of First Mennonite in 1952. JJ continued to act as *Ältester* of Mayfair, serving with baptism and communion until 1958.<sup>58</sup>

First Mennonite Church's many programs required the time and energy of many members. In numerous instances, JJ found a particular individual to fill a particular need. In his characteristic fashion, he did not ask people if they would help out; he simply informed them where they would assist. The following story was shared by Elmer Richert who, as many others, was recruited in such a way in the early 1950s.

When I came to Saskatoon to the University, I got a phone call from Rev. J.J. Thiessen. As we talked he invited me to his house: “I expect

you to be here tomorrow at 7 in the evening.” So I went.

When I got there, I was not the only one. There was Homer Janzen, Alvin Friesen and Irwin Schmidt, and we all received our Assignment (sic).

“Elmer, Mayfair Church needs a song leader; you will be their Choir Director.”

“Alvin, Pleasant Hill needs a Sunday School teacher; you will be in charge of the Sunday school.”

“Irwin, you will lead the Bible Study group here in the Fourth Avenue Church.”

“Homer, you will be the Young People’s Leader.”

“All four of you will form a quartet and serve here in the church.”

Thus we were sent, not two by two, but one by one—we went.<sup>59</sup>

For JJ, the dramatic growth and activity at First Mennonite was accompanied by an increased workload. This increase coincided with his mammoth responsibilities on the wider church scene. One of his coping strategies was to step back from direct involvement at Pleasant Hill, from teaching in the German school and Sunday school programs and a few other things. Another strategy was to request some help. As early as 1949 JJ suggested the election of a deacon but it was not until 1952, after he preached a weighty sermon on the role of the deacon, that action was taken. Very soon after that Peter A. Reimer was elected for a five-year term as deacon. It was Reimer’s responsibility to assist in the visitation of sick and needy, to organize the worship services in JJ’s absence and, in general, to care for the spiritual life of the congregation. Several elderly lay ministers, who had retired to Saskatoon from the surrounding area, assisted with preaching and teaching when JJ was away on business.

Reimer’s assistance was greatly appreciated, but JJ’s schedule remained gruelling. He continued to preach virtually every Sunday, unless he was out of town. He chaired all the meetings of the Trustees and the *Bruderschaft*, as well as leading Bible studies and other meetings. He carried on as much as possible with home and hospital visitations making several hundred calls a year. Each spring he held catechism classes with a large group of young adults, culminating with baptism on Pentecost. With the growing and also aging congregation, he performed many more wedding ceremonies, anniversary celebrations and funerals as well. By the mid-1950s he was averaging 17 weddings per year.

In truth, JJ was rather proud of all the work he managed to accomplish. This is reflected in the quarterly reports he continued to submit to the General Conference Home Mission Board and the annual reports he

shared with his congregation. For the Home Mission Board, he supplied a day-by-day account of all his activity, in the congregation and beyond, over the three-month period (see Table 1 below). For the congregation, he provided detailed statistics on the number of sermons preached, home and hospital visits made, couples married, young people baptized, trips made, and so on (see Table 2 below). From time to time, he sent these reports to *Der Bote* as a way of informing friends and co-workers further afield about the work in Saskatoon. Publicizing one's activities in this way represented a fairly significant departure from traditional practice since it was generally believed that publicity would detract from one's heavenly reward.

Not everyone was impressed with JJ's public accounting of his myriad activities. This included a few individuals in his own congregation as well as some beyond. At the height of the Winnipeg controversy, 65 individuals from the Schoenwieser congregation signed their names to a letter harshly critical of JJ's handling of the affair with their *Ältester*, Johann Enns. The signatories also found JJ's practice of publishing his accomplishments quite offensive. "We find it strange behaviour when, during the election process, our ministers get up before the electorate and announce their accomplishments. It seems even more strange when the servants of the Word report on and evaluate their pastoral work in church papers, giving numerical data on home visitations and sermons preached."<sup>60</sup> P.D. Willms of JJ's congregation shared a distaste for what he felt was "a running and chasing after positions and prestige."<sup>61</sup> Evidently some individuals felt JJ was lacking in the humility that was expected of a pastor in his position.

Willms was part of a minority within the congregation that was at odds with JJ and the leadership which he provided.<sup>62</sup> Some of this opposition surfaced at the time of the Winnipeg controversy, and reflected the close ties and loyalty that some First Mennonite folks had with the Schoenwieser congregation in Winnipeg. The tension was heightened in 1950 when a long-simmering conflict at Rosthern Junior College (RJC) (formerly the German-English Academy, then the Academy) erupted into a major battle.<sup>63</sup>

### **Troubles at RJC**

JJ had served on the RJC board continuously from 1936, but had not given the school nearly the attention he had devoted to other projects and causes. Over the years he had not attended meetings very regularly. The Thiessen children had not attended RJC nor could the family afford to send them. However, in 1950 JJ found himself in the middle of a major controversy at the school.

**Table 1**  
**Report to the GC Board of Missions**  
 July 25, 1952

May 1	Conducted funeral service
May 2	Left at 1:20 a.m. by plane for Winnipeg Conference in Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg Meeting with Dr. T.O.F. Herzer, C.P.R. Proceeded by plane to Chicago
May 3	Attended MCC Executive Meeting in Chicago Visited Pacific Garden Mission for the first time Proceeded to Newton at night
May 4	Attended youth meeting of Western District Conference in Newton
May 5-6	Attended semi-annual Mission Board meeting, Newton
May 7	Visited Gen. Conference Headquarters, Newton. Rev. H. Dyck, C.J. Dyck, P.J. Dyck, Dr. C. Krahn, and W.J. Fretz
May 11	Consecration of children service Preached Mothers' Day sermon Catechism instruction in afternoon Spoke at C.E. meeting in the evening
May 12	Made 2 pastoral calls
May 13	Attended Jr. W.M.S. meeting
May 14	Called on 7 homes Church trustee meeting at night
May 15	Attended and spoke at mission sale of Girls' Home and Girls' Auxiliary
May 16	Accompanied a sick immigrant lady to the invalid home at Rosthern
May 17	Visited 13 patients in hospital
May 18	Preached in the morning on the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization Catechism instruction in the afternoon Visited a sick and aged brother in his home Jr. C.E. program followed by lunch
May 19	Meeting with Mayfair church trustees
May 20	Attended banquet of British and Foreign Bible Society
May 21	Visited 10 patients in sanatorium
May 23	Made a pastoral call Catechism instruction at night
May 24	Visited 20 patients in our hospitals
May 25	Delivered sermon in the morning Spoke at a special mission service at Aberdeen, Sask. in afternoon <i>(This little congregation has sent to our treasury \$1000.00 for      the support of J. Giesbrecht who will be ordained on July 27th      for mission service in India)</i>
May 26	Brotherhood meeting
May 27	Catechism instruction at night Attending Jr. W.M.S. meeting
May 28	Made 8 pastoral calls
May 29	Attended meeting of Mennonite Central Relief Committee for Western Canada At night C.A. DeFehr gave report on his recent visit to Paraguay
May 30	Catechism instruction in the evening

Table 2

<u>Daten fuer den Arbeitsbericht - 1954.</u>		
<u>J. J. Thiessen.</u>		
Gepredigt in der eigenen Kirche	-	43 X
" in Pleasant Hill	-	15 X
" in Mayfair Kirche	2	3 X
" in Sanatorium		9 X
Gepredigt und Berichte gegeben auf andern Stellen	-	32 X
Bei Abendmahlsfeiern gedient	-	4 X
Auf Tauffesten	-	2 X
Kindereinsegnung	-	1 X (9)
Ordination an Missionaren	-	1 Paar
Auf Abschiedsfesten fuer Missions- arbeiter gedient		2 X
Trauhandlungen vollzogen	-	17
Auf Silberhochzeiten gedient	-	1 X
auf goldener Hochzeit "	-	1 X
Verschiedene Konferenzen besucht	-	7
Komiteesitzungen beigewohnt	-	27
Zu Jugendversammlungen gesprochen	-	6 X
MCC Sitzungen in Chicago beigewohnt		6 X
Hausbesuche in der Gemeinde gemacht		80
Hospitalpatienten besucht		520
Bibelstunden geleitet		13
Versammlungen der Missionsvereine besucht		10 X

*JJ's summary of 1954 official activities in congregation, conferences and the wider Mennonite community.*

At issue was the perceived "laxness in spiritual matters" of one of the faculty members, P.P. Rempel. "P squared," as he was nicknamed, was known as an excellent teacher and highly regarded by the students. But there were concerns that Rempel's theological views and spiritual influence departed from constituency expectations. These concerns were shared by several board members, including chairperson H.T. Klaassen



and people in the supporting churches. For some, the fact that Rempel had explained the theory of evolution to his students raised the spectre of liberalism and modernism. Others were convinced that Rempel did not exert "a strong enough influence in the direction of the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>64</sup> Discontent with Rempel had surfaced at several points over the years (he began teaching at RJC in 1937), and board members had made a number of attempts to encourage him, as well as other teachers, to maintain a higher spiritual standard. But the concerns did not abate and matters came to a head at an RJC board meeting in February 1950. After a lengthy debate, the board voted to request Rempel's resignation.

The board's decision unleashed a fury of resistance that continued for weeks. Not only did Rempel himself challenge the action, but students, parents of students, alumni, friends and relatives of Rempel, and some leading men from the Mennonite community all rallied to his defence through letters, petitions, newsletters, special meetings and even articles to *Der Bote*. Although the board seems to have had difficulty supplying concrete evidence of Rempel's lack of spirituality, the decision held. Rempel appealed for a compromise and requested at least one more year of employment, but the compromise was not forthcoming. At the end of the school year Rempel packed his bags and left Rosthern for good. Within another school year the entire faculty, including its president, K.G. Toews, had resigned.

Although JJ was not chair of the RJC board, nor even a member of the executive, he nevertheless became the target of much of the anger of Rempel's supporters. Given his high profile, this is hardly surprising. Quite a few RJC students and alumni attended First Mennonite Church, and they were very disappointed in the stance taken by their *Ältester*. D.A. Lepp, a close friend of JJ's, a charter member of First Mennonite and long-time congregational secretary, was also troubled by the board's actions and JJ's support of it.<sup>65</sup> Most critical of all was P.D. Willms, father of one of the students, a cousin of Rempel's and a person who already had had a number of run-ins with JJ. Willms was convinced that JJ was to blame for Rempel's dismissal, charging that JJ had used his position as Conference chairperson to isolate Rempel as he had Johann Enns of Winnipeg. He wrote, "Once again a person is being isolated and declared unworthy, one who has the full respect and support of his students. . . ."<sup>66</sup> JJ also received many letters, calls and visits from persons outside his own congregation who felt the board was in error.

Where exactly did JJ stand on the issue of Rempel's dismissal? At the important February meeting, he had initially suggested some further discussion with Rempel before the board took action. But after the vote was taken, he supported the position taken by the majority of board

members. In letters, he expressed the board's view that Rempel's Christian influence was weak, and that the school must remain on the highest moral and religious ground.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, JJ was not at all happy that he was receiving so much flak for the board's action. Additionally, as he listened to Rempel's supporters, he seems to have experienced some discomfort with the decision, or at least with the way the decision had been processed. He had a number of suggestions for H.T. Klaassen, board chairperson, for dealing with the controversy in ways that would diminish the clamour. One idea was to call a special public meeting where the voices of the board's detractors, as well as its mostly-silent supporters, could be heard. This, he argued, would be a way for the board to demonstrate accountability to the school society. Ironically, JJ's comments came just as he was preparing to leave for Winnipeg where a final decision about Arnold Regier's termination as president of CMBC was to be made. "No one understands your situation better than I," was the conclusion of his letter to Klaassen.<sup>68</sup> Klaassen did not take up JJ's suggestion. It could be that he did not appreciate JJ's counsel. In the context of CMC work Klaassen often felt that JJ was overbearing. Possibly he felt this even more keenly in matters dealing with RJC where he was the chairperson and JJ just another board member. One thing that is significant about the interaction between H.T. Klaassen and JJ, however, was JJ's penchant for compromise. He obviously supported the board decision to dismiss Rempel. But given the outcry that decision provoked, he was eager to find ways of mediating a solution.

Back at First Mennonite, the tension over Rempel's termination reached deep into the congregation at a time when the wounds over the Winnipeg controversy were still tender. In January of 1949 JJ had lamented the lack of unity in the congregation. Eighteen months later, in the wake of the RJC scandal, he again confronted disunity and strife in the church, encouraging forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, in his sermon he noted that where ministers were involved in conflicts, it behooved them to concede to others so as not to exacerbate the quarrelling. Could it be that JJ apologized to P.D. Willms and possibly others about the board's actions, or at least admitted that errors had been made? Evidently there was some healing in the relationship between the two men. Within a year of the RJC scandal, JJ reported to the First Mennonite *Bruderschaft* that "a brotherly relationship" had been re-established between himself and Willms.<sup>70</sup>

Despite the existence of some opposition in the congregation, JJ was highly respected and dearly loved by the majority of members at First Mennonite. He was appreciated for his rootedness in the faith, his sound

biblical preaching and his commitment to the church. His cheerful and optimistic outlook, his engaging personality and his genuine interest in people did much to endear him to young and old. If there was occasional grumbling about the many things which took JJ away from his church, there was also a sense that those same involvements widened the congregation's horizons and brought it stature and prestige.

### **Family Life**

It is obvious, given the breadth of his responsibilities in the congregation, the conference and in the ministries of the wider church, that JJ did not have much time for his family during this period. He was away from Saskatoon on church business a great deal, and when he was "at home" he worked from early in the morning until late at night. Even Sundays were filled with catechism class, Bible study, anniversary celebrations and *Jugendverein*. And so it went day after day, week after week, month after month.

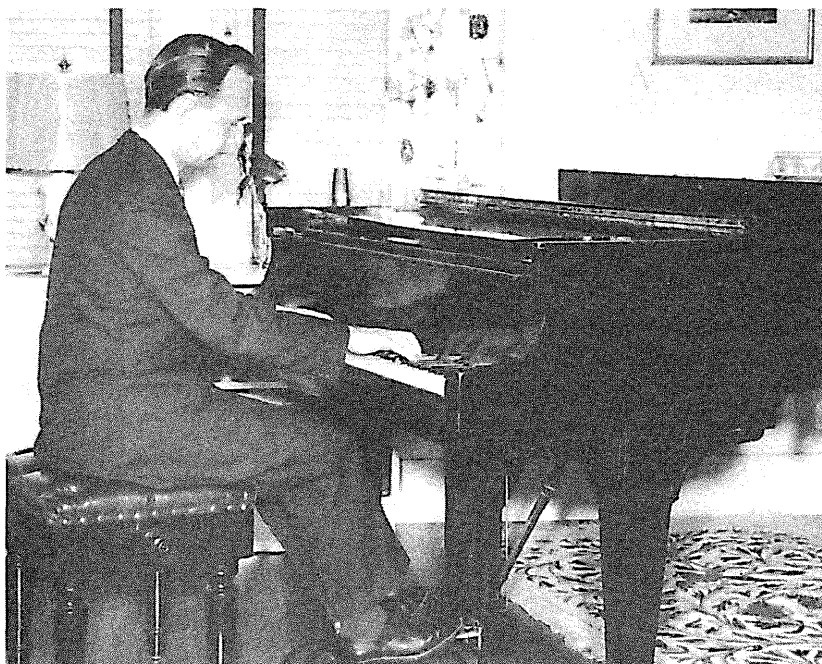
It is said that Tina never complained that JJ was so busy and absent so much of the time. She believed that his calling to ministry was also her calling to a supportive role, and she was committed to fulfilling that to the very best of her ability. This meant accepting whatever the church demanded of him. It is not known whether inwardly she resented the fact that she was left with so many additional responsibilities and with few of the "perks" which he received. Perhaps she did, but the context was not one which "permitted" the expression of such thoughts and feelings. Meekness, self-sacrifice and long-suffering endurance were expected of Mennonite women, especially ministers' wives. For Tina, as the wife of the *Ältester*, to have departed from that ideal would have been tantamount to one of the children smoking or frequenting the movies.

In truth, there were a few "perks" that Tina derived from being married to a distinguished and respected church leader. Her trip to South America in 1950 (described in the previous chapter) was one such benefit. Another was the gift of the home which the Thiessens had rented since 1941. In 1953, ten years after JJ had been elected as CMC chairperson, the conference voted to purchase the house on 4th Avenue and present it to the Thiessens as an expression of appreciation for their years of service. There was also the status which was bestowed on Tina simply because she was "Mrs. J.J. Thiessen." But there can be no doubt that she paid a huge price as a result of the enormous demands he shouldered.

Fortunately, life was somewhat easier for her now that the children, except Walter, were grown and on their own. In addition, her work with the *Mädchenheim* had declined considerably. To be sure, the influx of new immigrants in the late 1940s gave it a new surge of energy, as single

refugee women found work in the city. However, things had changed—now most of the women lived on their own and did not need a gathering place at the Thiessen home. Tina nevertheless kept busy managing the household, doing her exquisite handiwork, cooking meals for the sick and elderly and, increasingly, looking after her growing number of grandchildren.

Son Walter turned 20 in 1948 but continued to live with his parents until he left for advanced music studies in Vienna in 1955. He had become an accomplished pianist and musician and had started to give lessons when he was still in high school. His presence and his music-making in the home were a comfort to Tina, especially during the many times JJ was absent. JJ affirmed Walter in his chosen vocation. He would have been happy if Walter had chosen to become a pastor, but early on he had recognized that Walter's ministry was a musical one. It was a joy for him when Walter became organist and choir director at First Mennonite, and father and son planned worship services together. At one point JJ queried Walter about the financial security of pursuing a career in music. Walter quickly reminded his father of the many sermons he had preached on the biblical text, "One shall not live by bread alone."<sup>71</sup>



*By his early twenties, Walter Thiessen was already an accomplished pianist.*



*Helen Thiessen and Merv Derksen on their wedding day in 1951.*

Daughters Katherine and Helen both married and began their families during this post-war decade. As their minister, JJ performed both wedding ceremonies. Helen married Merv Derksen of Langham in 1951. Their first child, Barbara, was born the following year. Robert followed in 1953, Lynne in 1956, Kathy in 1960 and David in 1963. Katherine married Jake Wiens of Herschel in 1953. She had taught high school home economics in Oliver, British Columbia, Regina and Stratford, Ontario, before returning to Saskatoon in 1953. Katherine and Jake's children were James born in 1954, Gerald in 1956 and Beverly in 1960. Daughter Hedie and son-in-law Victor Loewen adopted a baby girl named Judith in 1950. She was a younger sister to JJ and Tina's first grandchild, "young Vic," born in 1944.

Tina loved nothing quite so much as having her growing family gather around her. For many years, she insisted on feeding a Sunday noon meal to the whole clan. She found it very difficult when Katherine and Jake later moved, first to Iowa for Jake to pursue doctoral studies in



*Katherine Thiessen and  
Jake Wiens on their wed-  
ding day in 1953.*

agriculture, and later to Regina. She often commented to her daughters, “I always thought we would all stay close together—like in Russia.”<sup>72</sup>

On August 12, 1954 tragedy struck the family when JJ and Tina’s son-in-law, Victor Loewen, was killed in a plane crash. The small plane in which he was a passenger came down just outside Saskatoon during a violent thunderstorm. Hedie was devastated by the loss and could hardly function for a time. Within just over a year, Victor’s parents also both died. The Loewens had lived with Hedie and Victor for a number of years. Their deaths left her reeling. At the time, JJ wrote to friends, “Sometimes she feels that this load is almost too heavy to bear, that is, having lost three loved ones in such a short time.”<sup>73</sup> Eventually Hedie took a book-keeping job to support her two children, but soon decided she needed a better source of income. With her parents’ encouragement, she returned to school to obtain a teaching certificate. Tina cared for young Vic and Judy while Hedie studied, and also when she found a teaching job nearby.

Between 1945 and 1955 JJ was in the prime of his life. Although diagnosed with sugar diabetes in 1952, which required some adjustments in his diet, he remained generally healthy and robust. He loved his work, whether it was visiting the sick in the hospital, offering the message at CMBC's opening program, discussing immigration matters with civil servants in Ottawa or attending MCC Executive Committee meetings in Chicago's Atlantic Hotel. He loved the work and was energized by it. Indeed, work was all he did, from the time he arose in the morning until he finally went to bed at night.

In the coming decade JJ's work would undergo considerable transformation. By the mid-1950s, the winds of change that had begun to blow around war's end had become a veritable gale. The blast would reach into the congregation, the conference and the wider church institutions. Within only a few short years, JJ would be swept along in a movement that would radically alter the Mennonite institutional landscape. In the late 1940s he had issued a resounding call for a new vision and for "enlarging the tents." A decade later, the tents were being dismantled and rebuilt in very different ways.

# 10

1955–1964

## Winds of Change

On January 29, 1956 JJ and Tina, both 63 years of age, hosted a celebration to observe the twenty-fifth anniversary and closure of the Saskatoon *Mädchenheim*. It was a bitterly cold and stormy Sunday which kept many people from attending. But 51 women, some with husbands and children, gathered with their former houseparents to mark the occasion. Over the years more than 500 women had been a part of the *Mädchenheim*. Those that were present recalled the Thursday night meetings—over 1300 of them, JJ noted—the special Christmas and Easter festivities, the birthday parties, the baptisms, the engagements and weddings. They remembered moments of humour and times of struggle and disappointment, and paid tribute to the nine women who had already died.<sup>1</sup> The afternoon ended with a light meal of coffee and pastries in the church basement.

### Change at First Mennonite Church

The closure of the *Mädchenheim* was a symbol of the change that First Mennonite Church was undergoing, a sign that one era was coming to an end and another was beginning. There were others symbols as well. In 1955 the General Conference Mission Board terminated its financial subsidy to support JJ's ministry. No longer considered an outreach of the Mission Board, First Mennonite incorporated as an independent congregation. The following year construction began on a large new church building that could seat up to 500 worshippers. About the same time D.A. Lepp, a charter member who had served as secretary-treasurer almost continuously since the founding of the congregation, resigned from his position in order to make way for a younger man. Thereafter church minutes were written in English. The deaths of several oldtimers was yet another sign of the changing times.

The winds of change were felt not only in First Mennonite; they were sweeping Mennonite congregations across the country. The forces of urbanization, education, professionalization and accommodation were changing the face of Mennonite life, particularly in the city churches. From Ontario to British Columbia, churches were being confronted with





*The Thiessens with women who attended the 25th anniversary and official closing of the Saskatoon Mädchenheim in 1956.*

calls for more English and less German, for professionally trained and salaried ministers, and for greater democracy in decision making, specifically, more involvement of lay men and voting rights for women. The manner in which congregations dealt with these demands varied greatly. In some churches the transitions were negotiated quite smoothly; elsewhere congregations split as differences over the pace of change could not be reconciled.

In January 1955 at the annual meeting of the First Mennonite *Bruderschaft*, JJ gave the usual report, reflecting on some important issues which demanded congregational attention. The report is revealing of his perspective on change and how he felt it should be navigated. The four issues he identified were: construction of a new building, inactive members, English in the worship service and voting rights for women. With regards to each of these issues, but particularly the latter two, JJ encouraged some careful but deliberate shifts. As always, he wanted to tread a path that could be supported by both those who advocated new ways and those who felt threatened by them. He obviously had a sense of the importance of his report and the meeting which discussed it—presumably to get things down right, he chose to write up the minutes of this portion of the meeting for secretary Lepp.<sup>2</sup>

JJ loved his mother tongue, the German language. But unlike some of his *Ältesten* and minister colleagues, he did not regard German as an essential ingredient of the Mennonite faith. Whereas some people insisted that the loss of German would necessarily mean the loss of religious commitment, JJ felt otherwise. The way to preserve and pass on the faith, he argued, was to use a medium that could be understood by the people. For the church not to make adjustments for younger non-German-speaking youth and children was to risk losing them. He noted in his report to the annual meeting:

It would be irresponsible if we as the church did not recognize the signs of the times and continued to have German worship services in spite of the fact that our children receive no instruction in the German language. Together we must navigate the church ship so there will be no split between the German- and English-speaking members. We will experience a great loss when we give up the German language. The loss of members and souls who do not receive spiritual nurture if we continue with the German would be much more difficult.<sup>3</sup>

By 1955 considerable English was already being used at First Mennonite. Children's Sunday school was taught almost exclusively in English, the choir sang English songs and the bi-weekly *Jugendverein* program typically used a mixture of German and English. Although

much less comfortable preaching in English, JJ would do so at a wedding or funeral if the people involved desired this. What he suggested was that an English sermon be added to the worship service every second Sunday. However, this required finding someone other than himself who had the necessary theological training, spiritual and oratorical gifts, and facility in the English language. The language issue was thus very much linked to the issue of leadership. What is important about JJ's 1955 recommendation is that he made it at a time when people were not yet clamouring for English language worship. Two years later he implemented a new system whereby *all* Sunday morning services had both a German and an English sermon.<sup>4</sup> As time passed, the *Jugendverein* became known as the Christian Endeavour program, the *Bruderschaft* was called the Brotherhood, English hymnbooks were ordered, and more and more meetings were conducted in English. As JJ wrote in 1961, "We need to make certain concessions to keep young and old together."<sup>5</sup>

The language transition at First Mennonite, although far from complete, was managed fairly smoothly. A more controversial issue was that of granting women voting rights. It had come up at the *Bruderschaft* meeting as early as 1939 and was raised again in 1947 but no action was taken. In 1949 the *Bruderschaft* resolved that women could be present at the meetings to hear the reports but they needed to leave the room for the discussion and decision making.<sup>6</sup> The idea was that husbands were to enlighten their wives later about the decisions that had been made. By the mid-1950s, however, JJ felt this strategy was no longer working. The problem was that the congregation had large numbers of women who supported the church financially and in other ways but who, because they were either single or their husbands were not members, did not have access to information about church business. By JJ's count, there were 21 widows, 15 single women and eight families where the husband was not a church member. By the early 1960s the church books registered 175 male members and 234 female members in or near Saskatoon of which 59 women were "non-represented."<sup>7</sup> In his 1955 report JJ urged: "A way must be found to inform such individuals and families about how things are going in the church so they will have the right, not only to take on responsibilities, but also to be involved in discussions and decisions."<sup>8</sup>

Evidently there was opposition to JJ's suggestion since no action was taken at this time nor in the next five years, even though the issue kept surfacing at meetings of the Trustees Committee and the *Bruderschaft*. Most of the opposition came from some older men in the congregation, including a number of senior ministers who had retired to the city from the rural areas. They frequently quoted 1 Corinthians 14:34 and Paul's admonition for women to keep silent in church as the basis for their

views, although arguments not based on scripture were also made. On one occasion, an older lay minister asserted that if in the barnyard the goose followed the gander, surely that was a sign that women should not have the same rights as men.<sup>9</sup> In general, younger men with more education favoured women being granted the vote. In 1958 a committee working on revisions to the First Mennonite constitution included women's franchise among its recommendations; again lengthy debate followed. The minutes of the April 14, 1958 Brotherhood meeting noted, "Many people had very definite opinions on this question" and "this problem will have to be prayerfully considered." By default the status quo remained.

As chairperson of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, JJ was aware that many congregations in the conference had already instituted voting for women and some were even sending women as delegates to the conference sessions. He felt that, if women were engaged in Sunday school teaching, foreign mission work and other forms of service, to prohibit them from participation in decision making constituted a grave inconsistency. For this reason he raised the issue with the CMC executive in 1958, even though he was fully cognizant that the conference could not dictate congregational policy.<sup>10</sup>

In 1960, he brought up the issue again at the annual Brotherhood meeting at First Mennonite. Without actually telling the men what to do, he listed several reasons for once again considering women's franchise: 1) the new church constitution had not yet been finalized and changes were still possible; 2) many women members did not have husbands to represent them at church meetings; and 3) many congregations had already moved to a more inclusive system and were sending women as delegates to annual conferences.<sup>11</sup> The assembled group agreed to take a vote on the issue but stipulated that a two-thirds majority be required to pass the motion (this was a departure from normal procedure). The secret-ballot vote of the April 27, 1960 Brotherhood meeting—21 to 16—was not sufficient to carry the motion.

The issue was raised again in 1961, but it took pressure from the Naomi Mission Society to build momentum. Late in 1962, the society requested the Brotherhood to reconsider its 1960 decision, especially for the sake of the more than 50 women who had no knowledge of church affairs. By this time the majority of council members (formerly known as Trustees) were in favour. At JJ's suggestion, the council asked incoming minister Edward Enns to present a paper on the biblical perspective on women in the church for the 1964 Brotherhood. A decision granting women voting rights was finally made early in 1964, several weeks after JJ had formally handed over the reins of leadership to Enns.

The issue of changing leadership models was not one that JJ identified explicitly in his 1955 remarks to the First Mennonite *Bruderschaft*. But he did intimate that changes in language would require some rethinking of leadership. If the congregation desired more English sermons, three options were possible. It could: 1) elect two lay ministers from within the congregation, who were comfortable preaching in English (the old system); 2) hire an assistant minister for pay (the new system); or 3) replace JJ with a new more fully bilingual minister.<sup>12</sup>

Under the old system, congregations elected ministers from within their midst. These were men who had already demonstrated integrity, spiritual depth and gifts for ministry. They generally served in a voluntary capacity, earning their living in some other way. Under the new system, congregations hired ministers for pay. These ministers had professional training (generally from CMBC) and were usually from outside the congregation that called them. In some ways, First Mennonite's style had always been somewhat of a hybrid of the two: JJ was not a professional in the sense that he had formal theological training, but he did receive a salary for his ministerial work (first from the Home Mission Board and then from First Mennonite itself).

In truth, JJ had been working behind the scenes on an option that stood somewhere between the first and second. He had already recruited Otto and Florence Driedger, CMBC and Bethel College graduates, to help serve in the Pleasant Hill chapel. JJ's hope was that First Mennonite would formally call Otto to ministry (only the husband received the formal call) and that the Mission Board could support him financially, at least partially. But the Driedgers had plans for further academic studies and left Saskatoon for Montreal in 1956. Over the next couple of years, JJ was able to recruit various young and educated men to assist him with English preaching, but this was obviously a stop-gap measure.

In November 1957 a mini-crisis at a Brotherhood meeting provided the catalyst for the congregation to consider hiring an additional pastor. During a discussion of inactive members, G.G. Baergen, a committed but sometimes abrasive individual, got up and accused JJ of spending too much time away from Saskatoon and neglecting his duties at First Mennonite. He also felt that JJ was behind the pulpit too much for young people to be attracted to the church. From the minutes of the meeting, it seems few others shared Baergen's rather contradictory views. As they rallied to JJ's defence, Baergen marched out of the meeting declaring that he was withdrawing all financial support for the church. The remaining men in attendance indicated their support for JJ's ministry by standing. A week later Baergen appeared before a special Brotherhood meeting to apologize for and withdraw his remarks.



*JJ behind the pulpit.* Photo: MHCA

If people were quick to dismiss Baergen and his rantings, his comments nevertheless served a useful function. For one thing, they made JJ take a hard look at those involvements which took him away from the congregation. As a direct result of this meeting, he submitted his resignation to the General Conference Foreign Mission Board where he had served as a member since 1947.<sup>13</sup> He also considered resigning as chairperson of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, but for reasons described below, he continued for an additional one-year term. Baergen's outburst also forced the Brotherhood once again to consider the issue of leadership, for it had become clear that language was not the only reason to elect or hire another minister—sheer workload was another.<sup>14</sup>

In the fall of 1959 First Mennonite Church hired Nicholas Dick, a recent graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana, to be a full-time assistant pastor. According to one member of the church council at the time, Dick's hiring brought the council face to face with a new and much more professional understanding of the role of the minister.<sup>15</sup> Issues like who paid for the stamps on church letters, where the minister parked his car, and what kind of pension plan was provided, had never before been discussed. JJ had never asked about stamps (most likely the Board of Colonization paid for these since Katie Hooge typed all the letters), he had never owned a car and he had never

thought about a pension plan. He had also never asked for a salary increase—what the congregation paid, he accepted. Could it be that the congregation was not ready for this newer kind of minister, one who felt a personal call to ministry but who nevertheless regarded his ministry as a job? Could it be that the salary offered by First Mennonite was inadequate to support Dick and his family?<sup>16</sup> Could it be that JJ was not really prepared for a ministerial partnership or that he also found the changes too drastic? Obviously some people felt that JJ and Dick were not getting along, for JJ felt led to respond to such charges, even while denying that there were difficulties between the two men.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the problem was, after only two years Nicholas Dick resigned and left First Mennonite. In the months after Dick's departure, the congregation returned to the older lay ministry system, electing two new ministers from within who could assist JJ with preaching and other ministerial functions. In the meantime, the church council began another search for a full-time paid minister.

In the area of ministerial leadership, JJ was somewhat more ambivalent about change than he was about language and the women's vote. On the one hand, he strongly advocated that pastors should have sound theological training and should be remunerated in such a way that they could give their best energies to the church.<sup>18</sup> But his heart was not always in the same place as his head on these matters. It was one thing to argue that ministers be hired by a church council of laypersons; it was quite another to have a layperson, rather than the minister, chair the council meetings.<sup>19</sup> He was also not fully prepared for some of the important shifts that the transition would entail. He did not foresee that ministers would become like employees bound by legal arrangements and that they would no longer remain in one congregation for their lifetime, as he had. Nor did he anticipate that ultimately a minister's authority and his ability to mediate God's word would diminish.<sup>20</sup> Of course, these shifts did not happen overnight, and JJ was not the only one caught off guard by the changes. In many ways, he participated in redefining the nature of ministerial leadership by establishing CMBC, but he also experienced a sense of loss when that redefinition was taken to its logical conclusion. This ambivalence is most evident in his response to the organizational transformation of CMC that took place in the mid-1950s.

### **Change in the Conference**

In many ways the changes occurring at First Mennonite were a microcosm of the transformation taking place within the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. But where the congregation's leadership structure shifted quite gradually, the change in the organization and leadership of

the Conference was radical and swift. Within only a few short years the face and personality of the Conference was altered irrevocably.

Several developments provided the impetus for a major overhaul of the conference system. First of all, there was a need to streamline, rationalize the total conference operation. By 1954, the existence of 10 different committees, with overlapping mandates and separate treasuries, made for a great deal of duplication, confusion and inefficiency. Secondly, the General Conference Mennonite Church had undergone a major reorganization in 1950. It made sense that the Canadian conference bring its structures into line with those of the bi-national body. Thirdly, there was an increasing call for a democratization of conference leadership. All of these developments in turn reflected how Mennonites were being influenced by the larger Canadian and North American society and how they were grappling with ways to accommodate without losing the essentials of Mennonite faith and life.

One of the key people advocating change within the Conference was H.T. Klaassen, a minister at the Eigenheim Mennonite Church near Rosthern and secretary of the Conference from 1948 to 1954. Klaassen did not like the fact that JJ could be re-elected as conference chairperson year after year and that he could operate in the way David Toews had: “bring everything under his control and put his stamp on all the work.” As early as 1951 Klaassen had suggested to JJ that conference offices have limited terms so that other men could be brought on board. In 1954 Klaassen declined renomination as conference secretary; instead, he made a motion at the annual sessions that the conference undertake a study and consider possible reorganization. Although there was little initial response to Klaassen’s motion, the conference executive eventually appointed a committee to conduct just such a study. Klaassen was appointed chairperson with David Schulz, J.M. Pauls, Gerhard Lohrenz and P.R. Harder as additional members on the committee .

The next year, 1955, Klaassen reported to the CMC annual sessions on behalf of the committee. The recommendations were radical and far-reaching. Conference committees were to be reconfigured into four program boards in keeping with the General Conference structure: Board of Missions, Board of Education and Publication, Board of Christian Service and Board of Finance. The CMBC Board and the program committee were to continue functioning much as they had. Each board was to have 12 members, except for the Board of Finance, which was to have five. The chairperson of each board was to sit on an expanded executive, in addition to the conference chairperson, vice-chairperson and secretary. All executive officers were to be elected for a maximum of three consecutive one-year terms, and no one was to serve on more



than one board. It was these last recommendations which proved to be the most controversial, for they represented a definite dismantling of the system whereby a few men, especially ministers and *Ältesten* like JJ, could be re-elected year after year and could serve on any number of conference committees. Although the recommendation was not explicit, an underlying assumption was that, from now on, conference offices would be open not to ministers only but to laypersons as well. The proposed changes marked a clear break from traditional patterns and in that way they symbolized the end of an era.

The recommendations were passed at the 1956 CMC sessions in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, after the congregations had been given a year to study them. The results of the vote were 421 in favour and 66 opposed. A vast majority of delegates obviously supported the proposal, but strong misgivings remained among a few. Right after the results of the ballot vote had been taken, a prominent minister approached H.T. Klaassen and exclaimed, "What have we done?"<sup>21</sup> Among those committed to the older ways was fear that the new ways would undermine the authority of the traditional leadership and therefore also weaken the church. Presumably among some there was also anxiety about a loss of personal power and stature. Klaassen's viewpoint, on the other hand, was that change was essential if the conference wished to be relevant to a younger generation. Years later, he wrote in his memoirs,

Looking back on the whole conference operation from then on, it is my opinion that this reorganization was carried through just in the nick of time. From there on a steady increasing number of young men have taken part in the work of the conference. Had we failed to recognize the appropriate time, chances are that we would have lost a good number of young men."<sup>22</sup>

For JJ, the personal implications of the changes were immediately obvious: he would no longer be eligible for election to the post of conference chairperson, a position he had held continuously since 1943. He was aware that Klaassen and others were eager to see someone else fill the office. Therefore, at the 1956 CMC session JJ indicated he would not stand for re-election. He did so even though there was an understanding that the new regulations did not apply to years of service already rendered and that he could potentially serve an additional three one-year terms. According to the 1956 Yearbook, "the Conference and especially the opposing candidate, Rev. Lohrenz, pleaded with [ JJ ] to remain for at least one more year. Elder Thiessen was then elected by acclamation and the standing conference, as an indication of its regard and support, spontaneously sang, 'Befiehl du deine Wege.'" The following spring, JJ

again thought seriously about declining nomination.<sup>23</sup> Word of this got out, and once again people rallied around him, encouraging him to stay on. One group that made a formal resolution to this effect was, interestingly, the southern Manitoba *Ältesten* who felt that continuity in leadership was important while the conference was in transition. They made this decision during the very same meeting at which they determined that the CMBC board needed to get rid of another faculty member.<sup>24</sup> So again JJ stayed on. But his failure to gain delegate approval for a new CMBC dormitory—his pleas were turned down in 1956 and 1957—as well as the rumblings about his absence from his own congregation, convinced him that this would be his last year as chairperson. One more time, however, he was persuaded to change his mind. When the conference of 1958 arrived and when construction of the dormitory finally was approved, JJ again agreed to stay on just once more. He wrote to John Thiessen of the GC Mission Board,

The spirit has prompted me to stay on for another year as chairman of our conference. I had set my mind very definitely to give up and to transfer the duties of the chairman to somebody else. Under the conditions and the constant pleading of so many I made the decision the last day to accept the position I have been holding for 16 years once more. May God supply wisdom, strength and ability to meet the demands of the position.<sup>25</sup>

The conference reorganization process was finally completed in 1959 with the approval of a revised constitution. Under the constitution, JJ's time finally ran out. At the conclusion of the 1959 sessions held at the West Abbotsford, British Columbia, church, he gave his farewell address. He noted the highs and the lows of conference work and his own human failings in trying to provide leadership. He also reiterated some of his driving passions, among them his heartfelt desire to build unity and understanding between young and old. Words of gratitude and thanks were expressed for JJ's 17 years in the role of conference chairperson. In the annual conference yearbook published some months after the conference, D.D. Klassen of Homewood, Manitoba, on behalf of the new conference executive, remembered to include words of acknowledgement and thanks to Tina Thiessen and the Thiessen children for the sacrifices they had made in connection with JJ's conference work.<sup>26</sup>

JJ's correspondence and personal papers provide little indication about how he felt in his heart about the reorganization. If he harboured strong feelings, he did not put them on paper. However, a number of indicators suggest he felt some sadness, perhaps again experiencing discord between his head and his heart. On the one hand, he agreed that

younger men needed to be involved in assuming leadership in the conference. He did not want to be like David Toews, who had clung to certain positions of power when he was no longer competent. He wrote to a close friend, "The Conference must never think that I have to be dethroned by force."<sup>27</sup> At the same time, he had difficulty actually letting go of the conference leadership. His waffling on the question of re-election over the three-year period is only one indication. Persons at the 1959 sessions, who witnessed him handing over the reins to new conference chairperson, J.M. Pauls, sensed that this was a painful experience for him.<sup>28</sup> In the weeks after the 1959 conference, on at least one occasion JJ scolded Pauls for not informing him of certain developments.<sup>29</sup> There were also times in succeeding years where JJ would stand up on the conference floor and give one of his traditional "pep talks" when some people felt it was no longer appropriate for him to do so.<sup>30</sup> If JJ's head supported elements of the reorganization, his heart was likely in another place.

Whether he was as resolutely opposed to the whole reorganization scheme as H.T. Klaassen believed he was, is unclear. Klaassen was certain that JJ was against it from the beginning. He wrote later in his memoirs, "Had the chairman of the conference, J.J. Thiessen forseen (sic) [the committee's recommendations], the politician he is, he would at least have tried to get around the whole matter."<sup>31</sup> Klaassen figured that JJ had misjudged the people whom he had appointed to the reorganization committee in 1954 (for example, David Schulz and Gerhard Lorenz). He suspected that JJ assumed these men would support the status quo, but in fact they opted for change.

Klaassen's crusade for new models of church governance and leadership did not end with the approval of the new CMC constitution. He continued to struggle with the operation of the whole *Ältesten* system. In his view it was wrong that only *Ältesten* could confer baptism and communion and that they were ordained for life (whereas missionaries were ordained only for a term). He also felt it was counter to the scriptures that *Ältesten* assumed so much power and demanded such subservience. Klaassen delivered a severe attack on the *Ältesten* system at a ministers' and deacons' conference held in Waterloo, Ontario.<sup>32</sup> Of course Klaassen did not speak in isolation; he was simply one of the louder voices in a movement that was sweeping the conference. This anti-authoritarian movement regarded a hierarchical model of leadership as neither scriptural nor in keeping with an Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding that all believers were "priests." Recently, it has been suggested that this movement was likely influenced as much by the interaction with "the modern world" and its ideas about democracy

as it was by a return to Anabaptist teachings.<sup>33</sup> In any case, within a few years the old system of leadership by *Ältesten* would be dismantled and replaced by one in which local ministers, increasingly professionally trained and paid, would carry out all the functions previously reserved only for *Ältesten*.

Many of the older *Ältesten* were deeply distressed by the changes to the traditional leadership structures and found the transition to a new model very painful. Some vocally resisted it.<sup>34</sup> JJ again kept his feelings to himself. Not even in letters to close friends did he reveal how he really felt about the demise of the centuries-old system. Others who observed him at the 1962 conference and in following years sensed that he was troubled with the new developments. Yet if he harboured fear or anxiety, he did not voice this—at least not publicly. In that way, he would be remembered as someone who accepted the new ways with considerable dignity and with grace.<sup>35</sup>

### **Change at CMBC**

JJ's days as conference chairperson ended in 1959, but he continued to serve as chair of the CMBC board. (Members of CMC boards could serve three consecutive three-year terms.) Things continued to be interesting at the decade-old college. During the last half of the 1950s JJ found himself on the hot seat again as the college experienced a new round of hurdles. Much of the anxiety was related to the financial burden of the new campus and facilities. In 1953 the conference approved the purchase of a 20-acre piece of property on the southwest corner of Winnipeg for a new campus, and in 1954 delegates endorsed the construction of a school building. In both instances JJ's friend at the Bank of Commerce in Saskatoon arranged for the financing of necessary loans. But the following years delegates balked at incurring yet another huge loan for a dormitory. Neither in 1956 nor 1957 would they approve action on the dormitory, despite the "warm and pleading manner" that JJ used to encourage an affirmative decision. He found this resistance most disappointing and considered it tantamount to a vote of non-confidence in his leadership. The dormitory project was finally authorized in 1958.

Just as the facilities problem was being resolved, new concerns were being raised about one of the CMBC faculty members, David Janzen. Originally from Pincher Creek, Alberta, Janzen had attended Mennonite Brethren Bible College and graduated from Bethel College. He joined the faculty of CMBC in 1948, teaching philosophy, history, sociology and related courses. Over the years there had been rumblings about Janzen within the board and the wider constituency. Much of the criticism aimed at him was similar to that voiced against Arnold Regier and, in many



*From 1950 to 1955, CMBC was housed in this beautiful building at 515 Wellington Crescent in Winnipeg. In 1955 a 20-acre property was purchased on the west edge of the city for a brand new campus.*

ways, the whole “David Janzen episode” had a very familiar ring. Like Regier, Janzen was a Bethel College graduate, schooled in “American” ways and therefore considered out of touch with Canadian Mennonite churches. Like Regier, Janzen invited students to ask questions and debate issues in class. Janzen knew German better than Regier, but he was known to argue for more English instruction. Moreover, again like Regier, he was suspected of holding liberal or modernist beliefs.

Once again the opposition came from southern Manitoba and, in particular, from six *Ältesten*, some of whom were members of the CMBC board. What brought matters to a head for these men—P. J. Schaefer, David Schulz, J.J. Toews, G.G. Neufeld, J.M. Pauls and W.H. Enns—was a series of book reviews that Janzen wrote for *The Canadian Mennonite*. (This English-language paper was begun in 1954 as a private

venture by a Mennonite-owned firm in Altona, Manitoba.) Janzen was much too swift to criticize fundamentalist authors and too eager to point out what Christians could learn from secular writers. Janzen's review of Arnold Toynbee's *History of Western Civilization* was especially problematic and clearly seemed to put him in the modernist camp.

As is often the case in these kinds of conflicts, many other issues added fuel to the fire. For one thing, Janzen was not very tactful. He had a way of speaking on the conference floor and in other public settings which put people on edge. Even if his arguments made sense, he alienated potential supporters simply with his angry and abrasive tone. This did not help his case. Secondly, Janzen did not get along well with college president I.I. Friesen. The two men had very different personalities and working styles and they clashed frequently.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Friesen was generally considered a poor teacher who was out of touch with students, while Janzen was a popular and engaging instructor. Friesen had studied at a fundamentalist seminary and liked to portray his differences with Janzen as theological, but it is evident that he felt quite threatened by Janzen. As the crisis deepened, it also divided the college faculty. The older and more traditional instructors like John Adrian and Gerhard Lohrenz sided with Friesen, while younger and more innovative teachers like Henry Poettcker and Waldemar Janzen supported Janzen.

During this time, policies and procedures at CMBC were still very informal and all teaching contracts were reviewed on an annual basis. At the January 1957 board meeting, Janzen's reappointment for the 1957–1958 school year was resisted by some members. According to the minutes of the meeting, JJ's plea for unity and support for all the teaching staff resulted in a vote of 9 to 3 in favour of Janzen's reappointment.<sup>37</sup> But that was not the end of the matter. Several months later a group of southern Manitoba *Ältesten*, including CMBC board members Wilhelm Enns and J.J. Toews, met on their own and resolved that the board's decision needed to be reversed.<sup>38</sup> In response to this action, there was a flurry of activity as students, alumni and others rallied behind Janzen. A special CMBC board meeting dealt with the resolution of the *Ältesten*, but the voices of moderation prevailed, and the January decision was re-affirmed. When faculty appointments were again being considered in 1958, however, the vocal southern Manitoba members again expressed strong opposition to Janzen, his use of modern methods of biblical interpretation, his questioning of the verbal inspiration of the Bible and his critique of fundamentalists. At the end of the lengthy and difficult meeting, the board voted 11 to 3 not to renew Janzen's appointment. What had finally decided the issue was a blunt statement from president I.I. Friesen that he could not continue to work with Janzen.<sup>39</sup>

As might have been expected, there was great outrage over the board's decision. David Janzen was hurt that his critics had avoided speaking to him directly about their concerns over the years. Initially he was hopeful that the decision could be reversed and he wrote to JJ in that regard. Other faculty members were deeply disappointed in the board. Waldemar Janzen, the young German instructor hired by JJ in 1956, challenged the board to dismiss him as well, since he shared his colleague's approach to the Bible. The strongest reaction came from students and former students. Many were simply angered that one of their favourite teachers had been dismissed while others saw that larger issues were at stake. One alumnus recognized that Janzen was neither fundamentalist nor modernist, but was trying to give expression to a more explicit Anabaptist-Mennonite faith.<sup>40</sup> He felt that Janzen had been maligned and misunderstood. Another was troubled that the college seemingly had no place for "an open search for truth under the leading of the Holy Spirit."<sup>41</sup> Still another took greatest issue with procedural concerns, suggesting that the board was yielding to the pressure of a "small but noisy group within the Conference" for the sake of unity rather than acting in accordance with sound judgement.<sup>42</sup>

For JJ, the preservation of unity was not contrary to sound judgement. In his mind, a split across generational, geographic or other lines would be devastating to both college and conference. His passion for unity again surfaced as the guiding principle for handling this episode. He was fairly sympathetic to Janzen but, under intense pressure from the southern Manitoba *Ältesten*, he acquiesced and let Janzen go. At the same time, he was committed to taking the concerns of students and alumni seriously. These were the new and upcoming leaders of the church who would have opinions in matters which concerned them and the future of the college. When P.J. Schaefer expressed unhappiness with the way students were lobbying for a reversal of the board's decision, JJ responded as follows:

It is not so tragic that College students have come to the defense of teacher David Janzen and have brought proposals and recommendations to the College Board. Our tactics have already calmed them down somewhat and soon College work and College life will return to normal. Most of these young persons are Christians who belong to churches and participate actively in discussions and decisions at their meetings. Why should they not be allowed to express their views here? We must guard against stirring up the "father and son" problem in our Conference. We want a harmonious relationship with all brothers and sisters.<sup>43</sup>

In the wake of the board's action, the CMBC student council presented a list of five recommendations to JJ for the board's consider-

ation. Within a year, JJ had met four of the five recommendations. Firstly, he made a statement to the students, providing the reasons for Janzen's dismissal. Secondly, he arranged for the hiring of David Schroeder as a new faculty member. He had actually spoken to Schroeder about this in 1956 when he visited Germany where Schroeder was studying. Thirdly, JJ encouraged the organization of a conference on fundamentalism and modernism to help elicit greater understanding of where the college stood with respect to these theological "isms." Finally, he arranged for Henry Poettcker to take over the presidency of the college from I.I. Friesen. I.I. had offered to resign on a number of occasions over the two-year period and that offer was finally accepted. All these were requests that the student council made. The only recommendation which JJ failed to honour was to reinstate David Janzen. In private, JJ told Janzen that he would be able to rejoin the faculty in the future, but that never happened.<sup>44</sup>

Once again, JJ had found himself at the helm of a ship being tossed about upon a stormy sea of change. Once again, he was confronted with very divergent views about the pace and direction of change. Once again, he manoeuvred his way through the storm, trying to listen to the concerns of various parties. Once again, his perception of what was best for the college prevailed over his support for one individual. However, this was the last time that he would be confronted with this kind of a situation. The winds of change that were sweeping the conference would soon ensure two things: 1) the influence of men like the southern Manitoba *Alttesten* on the CMBC board would be weakened considerably; and 2) faculty appointments (and dismissals) would be formalized.

A clear sign of the first of these occurred at the 1958 CMC sessions when JJ was called upon to defend the actions of the board in dismissing Janzen. During the discussion, Janzen went to the microphone and proposed a motion that members of the college board be elected in proportion to the constituency population in the respective provinces. He obviously wished to highlight the fact that Manitoba had more than its share of representatives on the board. According to the English version of the minutes, Janzen's motion was interpreted as a vote of non-confidence in the board. It certainly did nothing to endear Janzen to his detractors. JJ noted that Janzen's remarks had harmed the "peaceful and harmonious mood" of the sessions. The motion was tabled. However, the following year, when conference delegates approved the new constitution, a provision for proportional representation for college board members was passed. From here on the influence of the Manitoba representatives would more clearly reflect their proportion in the conference constituency. Even more important than the waning influence



of Manitoba members, however, was the declining authority of the *Ältesten* generally. Hereafter, a more diverse group of men gathered around the CMBC board table (it would be some years until the first woman was elected).

After David Janzen's departure, various practices were also formalized and professionalized. During its first decade of existence, the college had operated with simple and informal policies and procedures. Decision making was centralized with the board, more specifically with the chairperson. In many instances, JJ single-handedly tracked down suitable teachers, offered them jobs, and only later got board approval for his actions. Waldemar Janzen was completing a BD degree at the Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Chicago when he received a phone call from JJ who was in town on business. JJ invited him to a meeting at the Atlantic Hotel and promptly offered him a teaching position. To JJ, it did not matter so much *what* Janzen taught, only *that* he taught. Janzen actually thought he was being hired to teach biblical studies; he later discovered by reading *Der Bote* that he would be teaching German.<sup>45</sup> This same informality in hiring was reflected in the way academic appointments were renewed on an annual basis, with the possibility of reversals mid-way through the year. The process by which David Janzen was dismissed was a clear indicator to some people that more professional policies and procedures were necessary. This notion was reinforced when the University of Manitoba withdrew academic accreditation for several of CMBC's courses very soon after Janzen's dismissal. If CMBC wished to be regarded as a credible academic institution, it needed to demonstrate a higher degree of formality in its operations.<sup>46</sup> Under Henry Poettcker's presidency, clearer and more formalized policies and procedures were put in place.

The "David Janzen episode" thus resulted in some important changes and in part ushered in a new era at CMBC. The school faced other new challenges during this time. One was that fewer students were showing interest in full-time church work, so the college's primary founding purpose was being undermined. The formation of Conrad Grebel College in Ontario, a Mennonite residence affiliated with and situated on the University of Waterloo campus, also led board members to wonder about pursuing a new direction for CMBC. They decided to negotiate a new relationship with the University in Manitoba. In actuality, it was faculty member Waldemar Janzen who undertook the monumental task of working out this new relationship. In 1964 the university approved the college as a teaching centre, empowered to offer specific university courses in the arts and sciences. It could now be acknowledged that, in addition to training ministers and church workers, CMBC's purpose was

to provide religious education for lay church members who were pursuing other professions.

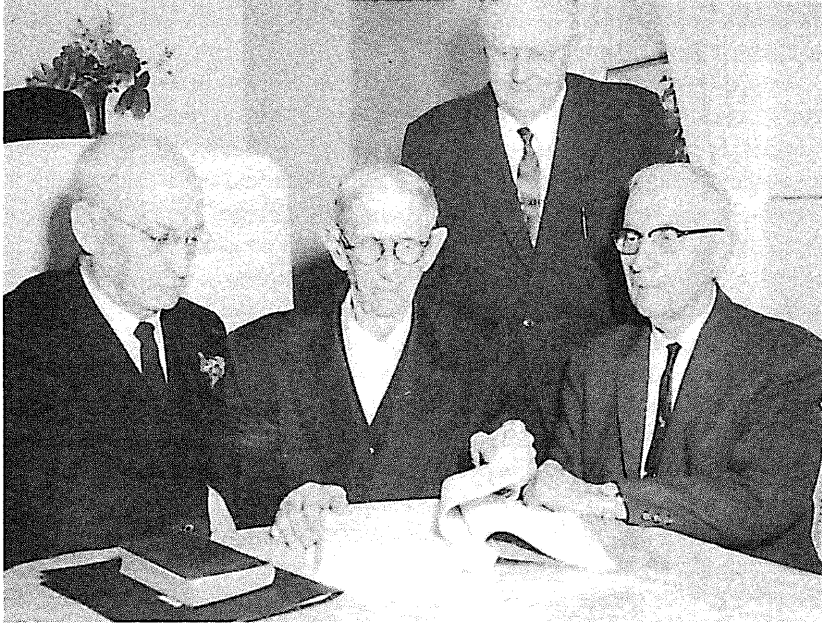
Right from the beginning, JJ had held to a vision that CMBC could both train ministers *and* provide a liberal arts education in a Christian context. According to one source, “He had no difficulty in telling those who wanted to hear it that CMBC was a professional college, and others who wanted to hear it that it was a liberal arts college.”<sup>47</sup> Under pressure from southern Manitoba, he had backed down on promoting the latter purpose. The shift made in 1964 marked the realization of JJ’s dream for a Mennonite liberal arts college. That it met with so little resistance was a clear indication that a new era had arrived.

The new era brought with it a less important role for JJ as college chairperson. He accepted this change at the college with magnanimity. Over the years, he had expended an enormous amount of energy on behalf of the college. At this point, he was happy to let others shoulder more of the responsibility. Most importantly, he had great confidence in Henry Poettcker and the new faculty members and trusted them to do what was right for the college and the conference.<sup>48</sup> He would continue to serve as the college board chairperson until 1966, and would carry on with traditional rituals such as his bi-annual pilgrimages to Winnipeg for the opening program in fall and the graduation in spring. But in reality it was now Poettcker and the faculty who ran the college.

### **Change in the Board of Colonization**

As the winds of change altered JJ’s work in the congregation, conference and college, they also buffeted his involvements in immigration and relief work. By 1955 the Board of Colonization’s work in bringing Mennonite refugees from Europe had virtually ended. Over the next number of years its efforts would focus on several new priorities: facilitating immigration of Mennonites from Paraguay, exploring reunification of Canadian families whose relatives remained in the Soviet Union, and overhauling the organizational structures of the Board and Mennonite Central Relief Committee. The Board also commissioned the writing of a history of its work. That history was published in 1962 under the title *Mennonite Exodus*.

Between 1947 and 1954 the Board had helped just over 700 Mennonites from Paraguay immigrate to Canada. In general, it was the economically stronger families who were most able to move, and their departure had the effect of weakening communities in Paraguay which were still struggling. As a general principle, both the Board and MCC thus discouraged the northbound exodus from the Paraguayan colonies. Where families sought reunification with relatives in Canada and were



*Some long-time leaders of the Board of Colonization and Mennonite Central Relief Committee: J.J. Thiessen, B.B. Janz, A.A. Wiens and C.A. DeFehr. By the late 1950s, all members of both committees were elderly men. Photo: MHCA*

able to raise their own funds, the Board nevertheless assisted in processing applications under the Close Relatives and Special Projects schemes. Between 1955 and 1962 the Board facilitated the immigration of an additional 2695 individuals from Paraguay. A number of these were people that JJ and Tina had met on their trip to South America in 1950.

Beginning in 1955 there were signs that another immigration of Mennonites from Russia might be imminent. These hopes were roused by the death of Stalin in 1953 and the beginnings of a process of “de-Stalinization.” This process involved granting amnesties to labour camp inmates, lifting oppressive restrictions on movement and communication and, in general, introducing a greater degree of individual freedom. Gradually, information about exiled and repatriated Mennonites began to trickle out of the Soviet Union. Before long the trickle became a steady stream. Since the end of World War II virtually nothing was known of those Mennonites who had never made it out of the Soviet Union to Germany nor of those who were repatriated back to the east. Now a tracing service, a joint effort of MCC, *Der Bote* and the Board, located many persons believed missing in the Soviet Union. A delegation of

Soviet Baptists which visited the West brought more word of Mennonites located in the eastern region of Kazakhstan. People dared to think of a possible reunification of those families that had been separated during the chaos of war. A 1955 Soviet-German agreement, allowing for the emigration of Germans from Russia, fuelled hopes for a general exodus. In the summer of 1955, JJ's Board of Colonization report to the CMC and MB conferences included the following optimistic words:

. . . a new time is coming for our exiled and all our people in Russia. With God all things are possible. Many prayers have been spoken for freeing those who remained and certainly it is in God's power to answer our prayers. Today we are optimistic that the time may be near when MCC as head of our relief organizations can begin negotiations with Moscow. Should the time come for the rescue of our people, then all reserves will have to be called on and the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, the Western Relief Committee and other relief organizations in Canada will find many opportunities for Christian Service in full measure. Until then we must continue to pray for those in bondage.<sup>49</sup>

With this new degree of openness in the USSR, JJ resumed the search for his lost relatives. Of his original seven siblings, he knew nothing of the whereabouts and well-being of his oldest sister Sarah, his youngest sister Mariechen and his youngest brother Abram. Somehow early in 1956 he tracked down Mariechen; she had moved to Karaganda in Kazakhstan with her only son Jacob and was active in the Baptist church there. Her response to his initial letter was poignant:

Dear brother, I have received your dear letter for which I have waited with intense longing. I have always waited for the way you sent it to me. Yes, it's been a long time since we've seen each other. I am so happy that you are still alive. I cannot sleep; I lie awake at night thinking about all of you.<sup>50</sup>

Mariechen confirmed the disappearances and deaths of brothers, brothers-in-law and nephews that JJ already knew about. She also wrote that their oldest sister Sarah had died after a stroke in 1952. This was the only death which Mariechen detailed, no doubt an indication she felt unsafe sharing more information in letters that were probably read by the KGB. JJ eventually learned that younger brother Abram had served many years in labour camps and, after his release, made his home in Omsk. In Abram's first letter to JJ, early in 1957, he wrote, "Dear Brother Jasch, 32 years have passed since we said goodbye in Lichtenau. I was 13 years old at the time and now . . . I am nearly old. . . ." <sup>51</sup> JJ was overjoyed to re-

establish communication with his long-lost sister and brother, even while he grieved once again over the many family members who had been sacrificed on Stalin's altar. He corresponded fairly regularly with Mariechen and Abram in the years after this.

Although JJ dared to hope for another mass emigration from USSR, he soon realized that the most realistic prospect was the reunification of family members separated by the war. But even here there were enormous obstacles. A primary consideration was the continuing concern about safety for Mennonites in the Soviet Union. For years, any contact with "the outside" had been cause for suspicion, arrest and even death. When one of JJ's brothers was arrested in 1937, one of the things held against him was that he had received a food package from JJ in 1935. Even now, letter writers expressed fear about what the consequences might be of their resuming communication with relatives in Canada.

Early in 1956 Mennonite Central Committee began to plan for a delegation of North American leaders to the USSR. Since JJ was a member of the MCC Executive Committee, had firsthand knowledge of the Soviet situation and could speak Russian, he was invited to lead the delegation. He longed to accept but, after consultation with his family and colleagues, he declined. Given his past involvement with the emigration of the 1920s, he feared that his visit would rouse the suspicion of Soviet authorities and very likely compromise the safety of any persons with whom he might have contact. He also strongly advised MCC that the proposed delegation should not undertake any discussions with Soviet authorities on the topic of family reunification. That was still too risky. The purpose of the delegation should be to establish contact with Mennonite groups, to fellowship with them, to preach—in other words, to carry out a spiritual ministry. Any public advocacy was inappropriate at the time. JJ fervently believed that the matter of family reunification was a top priority, but to make official appeals this early on could jeopardize the fragile links that were being re-established. It appears that JJ's words of counsel carried weight with the Executive Committee for the mandate of the delegation was revised, at least on paper.<sup>52</sup>

In succeeding years, JJ continued to raise the voice of caution as MCC organized further delegations and pursued the development of an ongoing "East-West office." His circumspect approach, perhaps somewhat out of character, was one shared and supported by B.B. Janz and other colleagues in the Board of Colonization and the MCRC. Many of these men had come face to face with the totalitarian Soviet system and had loved ones still living under its grasp. They were adamant that MCC not be perceived by Soviet authorities as interfering in internal

affairs. Other members of the MCC Executive Committee, especially Harold S. Bender, were more optimistic about the Soviet future and preferred a more aggressive approach. As a member of the 1956 delegation, Bender had in fact pushed the edges of the group's mandate by writing to a Soviet government official, appealing for recognition of Mennonites as a religious body. This action proved to have negative consequences for some of the Soviet Mennonites who met with Bender. Many years later, his biographer would assert that Bender badly underestimated the difficulties of renewed interaction with the Soviet Union.<sup>53</sup> Evidently, JJ's caution was well advised.

While he cautioned against pressuring the Soviets on family reunification, he nevertheless did what he could to remove obstacles on the Canadian side. In the fall of 1955 he approached the Department of Immigration regarding Canada's regulations on immigrants from the USSR. The Board of Colonization wanted "to be in the position to give our people a definite answer when inquiries are being made."<sup>54</sup> He and Katie Hooze then worked with Canadian families to submit applications to the Department under the Close Relatives scheme. In numerous instances, JJ wrote special letters on behalf of the applicants. He also made several trips to Ottawa to plead with officials in the Departments of Immigration and External Affairs to expedite matters. Unfortunately, there was little that Canada could do. By 1962 only 10 Russian Mennonites had arrived under the Close Relatives scheme. Moreover, with the heightening tension of the Cold War in the early 1960s, only the most optimistic remained confident.

The organizational restructuring of the Board of Colonization was another matter which occupied a considerable amount of JJ's time and energy. This restructuring was prompted by many factors. Internally, the Board's days of glory had passed. The two massive migrations that it had facilitated were over and a third one seemed less and less likely. Additionally, the Board's membership consisted exclusively of older men who had served for years and years. One MCC administrator referred to the organization as "a dead horse."<sup>55</sup> Something needed to change if the organization was to move forward successfully into the future. Externally, the same larger forces that were responsible for rationalizing, formalizing and bureaucratizing the CMC and CMBC structures were also at work in the reconfiguring of other inter-Mennonite organizations, including the Board of Colonization. Amidst a younger generation of leaders there was great frustration over the confusing plethora of agencies with overlapping constituencies and mandates. These younger leaders promoted the vision of one inter-Mennonite body in Canada that would bring together all the tasks of immigration, relief, peace, service and

representation to government, namely, an organization like Mennonite Central Committee. *The Canadian Mennonite* was a strong advocate of this idea.

This reorganization required many steps along the way.<sup>56</sup> Of most immediate concern to JJ was the amalgamation of the Board and the MCRC. A.A. Wiens, Board and MCRC member from British Columbia, had proposed this idea as early as 1947 and repeated it several times over the years. The idea made a great deal of sense, given that the Board and MCRC were virtually indistinguishable. JJ, however, resisted moving ahead on a merger until 1959. Essentially two factors made the time ripe then. One was growing support for the idea of a merger as represented by editorials in *The Canadian Mennonite*. The second was B.B. Janz's resignation from the leadership of the MCRC because of declining health.<sup>57</sup> The existence of two supposedly separate but closely linked organizations had allowed the venerable Janz to carry on in an official capacity as leader long after he really had the capability to do so. His resignation removed the obstacle to a formal merger. By 1960 the Board and MCRC had joined to create the Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council (CMRIC).

This was only one step in what was a complex process. Even before CMRIC was fully operational, there were already discussions about merging its activities with those of the Canadian Mennonite Relief Committee (CMRC) and the Non-Resistant Relief Organization (NRRO). The first of these was operated by the Manitoba *kanadier*, the latter by a wide range of Ontario groups, including (Old) Mennonites, GCs, MBs and the Brethren in Christ. The result would be a Canada-wide (that is, Ontario to British Columbia) relief organization supported by virtually all Mennonite groups in Canada. But before this merger could take place, it was overtaken by a move toward an even larger amalgamation of the relief agencies with the newly created Historic Peace Church Council of Canada (HPCCC). This inter-Mennonite body was formed in 1957 as the one organization which could represent all Canadian Mennonites before the government on issues related to peace, military and alternative service. It was founded in response to Cold War tensions and the fear, among some Mennonite leaders, that a new war would find Mennonites as divided as they had been in World War II. The formation of HPCCC symbolized the healing that had taken place between groups which had been at variance over alternative service just 15 years earlier.

These discussions culminated in a special meeting convened by HPCCC in Winnipeg in the spring of 1963 and attended by representatives of 12 different Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conferences. At that time, a decision was made to create a new national organization that

would be “the administrative agency for peace education, relief, voluntary service, government contact, immigration and any other matter that would normally be the responsibility of a national body for the Mennonite Brotherhood of Canada.”<sup>58</sup> The idea was to create a Canadian version of Mennonite Central Committee. Eventually, the name Mennonite Central Committee Canada (MCCC) was finally agreed upon, although it was not the first choice for everyone. MCCC finally came into existence in 1964.

All of this was of course a tremendously complex process. Along the way there were fears to be calmed and sensitivities to be weighed and balanced. There were concerns that the east would dominate the west and vice versa, that certain conferences would be under-represented and others over-represented, that the connection with Mennonite Central Committee would be too strong or not strong enough. JJ himself ruffled the feathers of some Ontario folk when he implied that the new organization’s office would be in Winnipeg and that the MCC office in Kitchener, Ontario, would become redundant. Besides all the “political” considerations, it was no easy matter to disband organizations which had long and significant histories and to which many people felt a great sense of loyalty and indebtedness.

What was JJ’s position on this radical restructuring of Canadian inter-Mennonite organizations? Initially, he resisted the reorganization, even the merger of the Board and MCRC. However, when additional voices began to call for such a merger and when B.B. Janz moved off the scene, JJ began to advocate it himself. He also argued that other organizations such as the CMRC and NRRO be invited to join CMRIC and thus create a broader relief and immigration organization. But when others began to suggest that CMRIC be dissolved and an even more comprehensive inter-Mennonite agency be created, JJ again resisted.<sup>59</sup> Some of his concerns were procedural—he felt there had not been enough consultation with the appropriate conference bodies. But more importantly, he was not ready for CMRIC to disappear into a multi-function, MCC-like body in Canada. In due time, however, he came to embrace this broader vision as well. At an important meeting of HPCCC in 1962, JJ was in fact the person who seconded the central motion instructing the HPCCC to move ahead on the creation of this new body. Later, he drew considerable satisfaction from the fact that CMRIC was the first of the disbanding organizations to hand over its program to MCC Canada.<sup>60</sup>

JJ was not at the forefront of the movement to create an MCC for Canada. A younger group of men were the primary movers and shakers. At the same time, he came to accept and even embrace the group’s vision for this new inter-Mennonite body.



### Change at *Der Bote*

Between 1955 and 1964 JJ concluded several board and committee involvements and anticipated stepping down from others. The one new assignment that he stumbled into was serving as chair of the editorial board of *Der Bote*. This happened in the spring of 1955 as a result of the sudden death of D.H. Epp, long-time editor of the German weekly. JJ had not had a formal relationship with *Der Bote* prior to this, but over the years he had contributed many letters and articles about conference and congregational matters. Because he cared about the future of the paper, he soon found himself presiding over a new chapter in its history.

*Der Bote* was founded by Epp in 1924 as a way for new immigrants from Russia to communicate with one another and nurture their faith. Initially, the hope was that the *Zentral Mennonitisches Immigranten Komitee* or a shareholders' society would take on ownership of the German language paper, but that did not work out. So Epp continued to edit, print and publish the organ on his own, using revenues from other printing jobs to keep *Der Bote* going.<sup>61</sup> In the late 1940s the General Conference approached Epp with an offer to purchase *Der Bote* and provide an annual subsidy in exchange for an amalgamation with the American-based *Christlicher Bundesbote* and the appointment of an assistant editor in Newton, Kansas. An agreement was evidently reached. But if Epp was happy to accept the financial subsidy, it soon became clear that he still considered himself the owner and publisher.

After 1950 *Der Bote* was confronted with the challenge of the language issue. In order to make the paper more appealing to younger readers, a special youth page became a regular feature. Before long the youth page was being written in English. Then in 1953 the firm of D.W. Friesen and Sons of Altona, Manitoba, established the first English-language Mennonite church paper as a privately sponsored and experimental venture. Interestingly, the first editor of this new paper was Frank Epp (no relation to D.H. Epp), a graduate of CMBC as well as former editor of *Der Bote*'s youth page. Named *The Canadian Mennonite*, the weekly quickly gained a following among younger readers. Indeed, some of these readers dared to suggest that the conferences should put their financial support behind *The Canadian Mennonite* rather than *Der Bote*.

JJ's response to these developments provides another example of his approach to change. On the one hand, he eagerly supported the development of *The Canadian Mennonite*. Editor Frank Epp was one of many CMBC students he had mentored, and he now gave Epp much encouragement. JJ himself took out several subscriptions and encouraged the young people at First Mennonite in Saskatoon to do so as well. At the same time, he was indignant at the suggestion of an American colleague

that *Der Bote*'s days were numbered. Many people in Canada still could not read or understand the English language. It was important to meet their needs with a German paper, even while also striving to reach younger readers with an English one. The last thing the Canadian church needed was church workers from the United States agitating against the German language. "The language problem is our problem and will take its course, but we do not want outside interference which might foster a break which would divide our churches into two groups: fathers and sons."<sup>62</sup> JJ believed that if change was too slow, the younger generation would be alienated. If change was too swift, the older generation would be left behind.

Already in 1954 he wrote to Cornelius Krahn at the General Conference with his concerns over the future of *Der Bote*. Editor D.H. Epp was nearing the age of 80 and his health was failing. JJ also was aware that, in the event of Epp's death, the ownership of the paper could come into dispute. He probably surmised that Epp's adopted son, Hans Heese, assumed he was the rightful heir, whereas the General Conference considered itself the owner. JJ recommended Krahn take steps to plan for the future. For whatever reasons, nothing happened. Two days after Epp's death in May 1955, JJ again urged Krahn to take action. He apologized for getting involved in a matter in which he perhaps had no business, "But as Chairman of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and knowing the sentiment of our people, I would like to urge you, Brethren, to take care of loose ends." In his mind it was critical that the Publication Board "forstall (sic) gossip and rumours which always have negative effects."<sup>63</sup>

Things moved very quickly after this. Within two weeks GC representatives arrived in Saskatchewan and, by the time they left a week later, they had reached an agreement with Heese, appointed a new editor and established a new editorial board. The new editor was Walter Quiring who had done some part-time work for *Der Bote* for a while. (Actually, Quiring was first appointed for a one-year term as a "technical worker." His status was upgraded to editor at the end of that year.) The editorial board consisted of J.J. Thiessen, chairperson, H.T. Klaassen and Cornelius Krahn.

The appointment of Walter Quiring was controversial from the start. On the one hand, he had a PhD from the University of Munich where he had moved from Russia in 1921, he had published two books on the Mennonites of South America, and he had considerable experience as a writer and editor. When JJ and Cornelius Krahn looked around for a new editor for *Der Bote*, Quiring was better qualified than any other person. On the other hand, there were concerns that Quiring fell short in matters

of faith and spirituality, that he did not understand the Canadian Mennonite church context (he had come to Canada only in 1951), and that his journalistic experience had been almost exclusively with secular periodicals.<sup>64</sup> In addition, some people were troubled by Quiring's past association with and support for Adolf Hitler's National Socialism and his service in the military forces of the Third Reich. During the 1930s, Quiring had written numerous articles for *Der Bote* promoting the notion that Mennonites were ethnic Germans and that being German meant supporting the Nazi cause.<sup>65</sup> In his view, it seemed, being Mennonite had as much or more to do with German identity than it did with religious faith. Quiring also embraced the National Socialist tenets of racism, anti-Semitism and pervasive anti-communism.

JJ knew at least this much about Quiring. They had met in Germany in 1948 when JJ had visited Europe on behalf of the Board of Colonization, and the two had spoken about Quiring's past and his beliefs. The following year Quiring continued the conversation by letter. About his involvement with the German military, he wrote the following: he had been forcibly inducted into the German army, he had served in a non-combatant role and he was still committed to nonresistance. He admitted, however, that it was difficult to remain nonresistant toward the Russians when he remembered the atrocities committed by Russian soldiers against German women at the conclusion of the war. Quiring also indicated that he now believed it was a mistake to have supported Hitler. Hitler's position toward the Christian church, his "handling of the Jewish question" and prosecution of the war were "wrong." The German people, including himself, "would think twice about another Hitler experiment," he wrote.<sup>66</sup> One might have expected stronger words from Quiring if indeed he had experienced a change of heart. A few years later he was somewhat more emphatic in admitting the error of his ways.

Being German and National Socialism are not the same thing. Someone can be a German, without at all being a National Socialist. The German people let themselves be deceived by Hitler. I also. . . . Hitler was the misfortune of the German people.<sup>67</sup>

Evidently both Cornelius Krahn and JJ felt that Quiring had undergone enough of a transformation to hire him as editor of *Der Bote*.<sup>68</sup> It is also clear that concerns about Quiring's faith and spirituality played more heavily into the decision than his past support for the Nazis. The minutes of a special meeting noted the concerns about Quiring's "theological convictions." Nevertheless, "On the basis of a report from those who frankly

discussed this question with Dr. Quiring, it was felt that his attitude had changed and that he would exert a positive Christian influence.<sup>69</sup> The appointment of an editorial board of “trusted Christian leaders”—this was something totally new—was seen as a way addressing ongoing skepticism and helping readers gain confidence in the new editor.

Why was Quiring’s history not more of a problem for JJ? Although JJ’s personal papers do not provide a definitive answer, we can surmise the following things. First of all, he was quick to forgive. If one of his parishioners erred or committed a sin, an admission of guilt and a sign of repentance was all that was needed for him to put the matter behind him. He was not one to insist on recompense or restitution or some other means of “paying for” one’s sins. Evidently he felt that Quiring was sufficiently contrite about his political activities that these could be wiped from his slate. Secondly, JJ held a very high regard for people with an advanced level of education, especially individuals who held a PhD. In his letters to Mennonite friends and acquaintances who held doctorates, he departed from his usual greeting of, “Dear brother . . .” and used instead, “Dear Dr. . . .” Very likely, Quiring’s PhD commended him for the job of *Der Bote* editor. Finally, JJ may in fact have felt some attraction to certain aspects of the National Socialist program, at least in its early years. Like many Russian Mennonites, he shared the Nazis’ anti-communist convictions and felt a deep attachment to the German language and culture. If he was not one of many Canadian Mennonites who wrote to *Der Bote* in the 1930s supporting the Nazi cause, neither did he voice adamant opposition to it, like his friends B.B. Janz and Jacob H. Janzen. Moreover, in his Board of Colonization work on behalf of post-war immigrants, JJ was not interested in determining if, in fact, some immigrants serving in the German military under Hitler had willingly participated in questionable involvements. (It does not appear that he did any “checking up” on Quiring.) It was his view that all Mennonites who had served in this way had done so under duress and that they should be free to come to Canada. Whatever his reasons for supporting Quiring’s appointment, he vastly under-estimated the problems that it would raise.

The first few years that Quiring served as *Der Bote* editor went fairly well. He initiated a number of important changes which, for the most part, were generally well received: the type was gradually changed from Gothic to Latin, new features were added, photographs were included and the quality of printing improved. The General Conference owners were particularly pleased with the changes. They wrote to JJ, “We appreciate the progress you are making in the ‘face lifting’ of *Der Bote*, and appreciate the emphasis that is being given to Conference concerns

and the interpretation of the work of the General Conference to our people.”<sup>70</sup> Thanks to a special conference subsidy, subscriptions to *Der Bote* gradually increased from under 6000 in 1955 to over 9000 by 1961. Moreover, the relationship between Quiring and the editorial board was a congenial one. Quiring frequently consulted with JJ on questions of content and format and addressed his letters with the deferential greeting “Lieber Ohm Thiessen,” even though he was the same age as JJ and much more educated. The future of the beloved *Der Bote* seemed on solid footing.

Over time, however, there was a sense that Quiring was taking the paper in a new and less comfortable direction. The people who noticed this first and felt it most keenly perhaps were members of the Heese family which continued to print *Der Bote*. The weekly had originally been conceived as a way for immigrants to keep in touch with one another. That “homey” vision was now falling by the wayside as Quiring attempted to model the paper after more sophisticated German periodicals. More space was devoted to world politics and events and less to obituaries and other homespun news.<sup>71</sup> This did not sit well with many older readers. Quiring also offended some of the South American subscribers when he began printing information that was told to him in confidence.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, some younger readers felt that reports on developments in Europe sounded very much like German nationalism and war propaganda and had no place in a Mennonite church paper.

By the early 1960s a bitter dispute had erupted between Quiring and JJ. Several issues were at stake. First of all, the General Conference had a policy that all employees retire when they reached the age of 70. In 1962, as Quiring approached his seventieth birthday, JJ raised the issue of finding a successor. Quiring found this quite offensive, especially because he perceived JJ to be over-stepping his bounds in suggesting who a possible successor might be. Not only that, he felt JJ was totally misguided in the names he suggested.<sup>73</sup> (By this time, it seems, JJ placed a much greater priority on a new editor being “in tune” with the churches than having journalistic experience.) Secondly, there was growing confusion over the respective roles of editor and editorial committee, and who had responsibility for which decisions. The understanding reached in 1955 was that the editorial board exercise strong leadership while the newspaper was in transition. As the years went by Quiring increasingly chafed under this agreement and took some liberties that the board found reprehensible. An example of this was Quiring’s critique in *Der Bote* of an early draft of a chapter of *Mennonite Exodus*. (This was the history of the Board of Colonization which its successor organization, the Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council, had commissioned.) The

chapter dealt with the political loyalties of Russian Mennonite immigrants in the 1930s and 1940s, and was fairly explicit about the support that some immigrants had given to Germany's National Socialism. The fact that Quiring commented on a draft of the chapter, even before it had been read by the officially appointed consultants, was considered seriously out of line.<sup>74</sup>

Quiring's editorial was only the beginning of a long and heated controversy over the infamous "Chapter 21." JJ found himself in a very difficult position; today it would be considered a conflict of interest. On the one hand, he was chairperson of CMRIC which had commissioned the writing of *Mennonite Exodus*. On the other hand, he was chairperson of *Der Bote's* editorial board. Thus, he was caught between two outspoken men with strongly opposing views: Frank Epp, author of *Mennonite Exodus* (and also editor of *The Canadian Mennonite*) and Walter Quiring, editor of *Der Bote*. Epp's position was that it was important to deal honestly with history, including stories of human failings.<sup>75</sup> Quiring, on the other hand, implied that Mennonites' sympathies for National Socialism could be excused because it held out the possibility of freedom for relatives and co-religionists still enslaved in the Soviet Union.<sup>76</sup>

In private correspondence Quiring revealed that he believed JJ was plotting against him. Quiring knew that Epp was working on a doctoral dissertation on the influence of National Socialism on Canadian Mennonite periodicals in the 1930s. He also knew from reading *The Canadian Mennonite* that Epp, in his early thirties, was critical of the strong anti-communist sentiments of the older generation. Now Epp had been hired to write the Board of Colonization history and was exploring the National Socialism issue in his book. Quiring was convinced that JJ had influenced the direction of Epp's research and conclusions so that he (Quiring) would be discredited. The fact that the appearance of Epp's manuscript coincided with the announcement that Quiring's days at *Der Bote* were numbered confirmed to Quiring the existence of a conspiracy.<sup>77</sup> Besides all this, he criticized CMRIC's decisions to hire someone so young to write its history and to publish the book in English. The fact is that over a ten-year period the Board of Colonization/CMRIC had in fact approached eight different (and more senior) men about the possibility of writing the history. None, including Quiring, was able to undertake the project.<sup>78</sup>

Quiring's theory about a conspiracy was clearly mistaken. When Epp got wind of the theory, he tried to set Quiring right as follows:

It is implied that J.J. Thiessen may have had something to do with my writing of Chapter 21, "Immigrants and Citizenship," for *Mennonite*

*Exodus* and also with my choice of topic for my doctoral dissertation.

I have no intention of taking issue with you when you try to say that J.J. Thiessen is a human being and makes mistakes. However, I must refute unequivocally the implication of your statements.

The decision regarding the above two writings is mine alone and no one has influenced me in that direction or suggested these themes to me. They grow out of my own research. In all my contacts with and correspondence from J.J. Thiessen, I have felt that he would rather have seen me omit chapter 21 and also choose a different dissertation topic. The letters in his and my files support this statement.<sup>79</sup>

Epp was right. JJ was not at all happy about Epp's wishes to include a discussion of National Socialism in the book. He felt that the book's purpose was to provide testimony to God's leading in the rescue of Russian Mennonite immigrants in the 20th century, not to provoke controversy, as Chapter 21 definitely would. Moreover, he knew that CMRIC would be held accountable for the contents of the book. JJ evidently realized early on, however, that Epp was not to be dissuaded from including this topic. His effort therefore became one of getting Epp to re-work the chapter. In this regard, he solicited the opinions of men like B.B. Janz, Gerhard Lohrenz and C.A. DeFehr, all of whom felt even more strongly about the issue than JJ. In response to their suggestions, Epp produced several more drafts of the chapter, removing the names of individuals with Nazi sympathies, providing more of an explanation for such inclinations and softening the overall tone. Over the spring of 1962, JJ kept up a steady stream of letters with more suggestions for changes. A special meeting was even called just to deal with Chapter 21. After four separate drafts, and still no sign that the chapter was acceptable, Epp was clearly exasperated.<sup>80</sup> In the end, a compromise seems to have been reached with JJ recognizing that there would be strong reactions to the book.

Throughout this period, Walter Quiring was sending letters to JJ, accusing him of deception and manipulation and intrigue. He sent copies of these to many people. JJ responded to only a few, which angered Quiring greatly. In April the editorial board met without Quiring, at which time JJ begged to be relieved of the leadership since it was no longer possible for him to work with Quiring. His resignation was not accepted. Quiring was not invited to this meeting, and this infuriated him even more. In June, Cornelius Krahn, who had received copies of most of Quiring's correspondence, wrote to both JJ and Quiring and urged them to try to work out their differences. JJ responded by making an apology to Quiring, although it is not clear what he was apologizing for.<sup>81</sup> Things were quieter for several months after this.

Late in the year the conflict between Quiring and JJ resurfaced. This coincided with renewed discussions on *Der Bote* policy and the publication of *Mennonite Exodus*. Quiring insisted that the editor, not the editorial board, must have ultimate authority for editorial decisions. He put this to the test by publishing a harsh critique of *Mennonite Exodus*, denouncing the book as biased, inaccurate and based on false interpretations. One of his criticisms, interestingly, was that Epp had given JJ too much credit for the post-World War II immigration. Quiring's review resulted in a flurry of letters to the editor, most of them similarly critical of Epp's book. (Several favourable reviews appeared later in *Der Bote* and in other periodicals.)<sup>82</sup>

As chair of both *Der Bote*'s editorial board and the CMRIC board, JJ was caught in a tough spot. To defend the book publicly would only be to exacerbate problems with Quiring and to confirm Quiring's suspicions that JJ was against him. Not to do so would serve to isolate Epp (who was feeling rather beleaguered about all the negative publicity), to undermine the promotion of the book and to widen the gulf between younger and older generations. JJ's response was again to try to resign from *Der Bote*'s editorial board, although it seems that this had more to do with the difficulty of working with Quiring than the awkwardness and inappropriateness of his carrying multiple roles. Once again JJ was persuaded to stay on "until the *Bote* gets out of the stormy sea into a peaceful harbor."<sup>83</sup> JJ clearly had the support of the General Conference as well as other members of the editorial board. Even H.T. Klaassen, who had had his own struggles with JJ over the years, was solidly behind him on this issue.<sup>84</sup> Eventually the editorial board took steps to limit the amount of negative material on *Mennonite Exodus* appearing in *Der Bote*, but Quiring continued to publish it until his term as editor finally came to an end in the summer of 1963.

The appointment of Peter B. Wiens of Herschel, Saskatchewan, as successor to Quiring represented a definite change of course for *Der Bote*. In 1955 Cornelius Krahn and others at the General Conference, as well as JJ in Canada, had felt that the most important qualifications for *Der Bote*'s editor were strong journalistic skills and high standards for the German language. Quiring possessed both of these requirements. Wiens, on the other hand, was a farmer with a *Zentralschule* education and only limited writing experience. (He had joined *Der Bote*'s editorial board in 1959 and had written occasional articles.) What Wiens possessed that Quiring did not, however, was an understanding of the readership. As J.H. Enns put it in a letter to JJ, Wiens is "so much one of us." Whereas Quiring had come as an outsider and remained so, Wiens was clearly an insider with an intuitive sense of the kind of paper that





*By the 1960s Der Bote's readership was increasingly dominated by women.*  
Photo: MHCA

Canadian Mennonites wanted. Wiens' appointment was a clear indication of a new set of priorities. The foremost need for *Der Bote* had shifted from journalistic and linguistic sophistication to familiarity with and sympathy for the Canadian Mennonite church scene. JJ and others had learned a lesson.

Wiens felt inadequate for the task and was reluctant to take on the position of editor. He initially agreed to a one-year trial, but ended up staying for 14 years. For a time, Walter Quiring criticized the "deterioration" of the paper from afar. But generally, readers were pleased with the change and Wiens blossomed in his new role. A later editor described the years under Wiens' editorship as "the most fruitful years of the *Bote*."<sup>85</sup> Additionally, relationships between editor and editorial board were most congenial during this period. JJ and Wiens had long been friends and working together for *Der Bote* their friendship deepened.

## Transitions

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, health issues began to interfere with JJ's strenuous schedule on a more regular basis. He was frequently bothered by painful kidney stone attacks. These attacks came to a head in August 1959. JJ and Tina were travelling by train to Ontario to participate in the ordination of Nicholas Dick just before he joined JJ in ministry at First Mennonite. Even before the train reached the Manitoba border, JJ was in such pain that he was taken from the train and admitted to the hospital in Melville, Saskatchewan. Tina continued on to Winnipeg where JJ met her two days later. From Winnipeg they proceeded to Ontario, where he performed the ordination ceremony while heavily medicated. They flew back to Saskatoon the following morning and he was promptly hospitalized. He had surgery on August 24 and only returned home on September 14. Fortunately, the surgery was very successful and he felt much better thereafter.

A special highlight for JJ during these years was his attendance at the 1962 Mennonite World Conference (MWC) in Kitchener, Ontario—the first time the conference had met in Canada. A whole decade earlier JJ had urged MWC to hold its once-in-five-year meetings in Canada. That wish now came true. It was an amazing experience to assemble with brothers and sisters in the faith at what was considered to be the largest gathering of Mennonites in 400 years. When it was all over, some 15,000 Mennonites from around the world had attended the sessions.

The World Conference proved to be one of the last occasions when JJ saw and heard Harold S. Bender. Bender delivered the main address to the conference, even though he was already gravely ill with cancer. The two men met one more time at the September 1962 MCC Executive Committee meeting. Bender died a short time later. JJ and Bender had served together on the Executive Committee since 1948. Frequently they had found themselves disagreeing, especially with respect to aid for South American Mennonites and the East-West program. But JJ had a deep respect for the man. When the Executive Committee met for the first time after Bender's death, JJ delivered a tribute.

There were other deaths of key co-workers during this period. C.F. Klassen died very suddenly in Europe in 1954, while B.B. Janz passed away after prolonged illness in 1964. The elderly Benjamin Ewert died in 1958, and J.G. Rempel and P.C. Hiebert in 1963. JJ began to think about his own mortality and to acknowledge that younger people were assuming leadership for the causes that meant much to him. He wrote to his old friend John Thiessen, now retired from his work with the GC Mission Board, “. . . the years rush by and a new generation takes up the work and carries it forward. Yet we are still young in spirit and in other

ways; nevertheless it is true that we are no longer 30 years old. Both of us have had many opportunities to serve God and people."<sup>86</sup> JJ was beginning to move more deliberately and intentionally into retirement.

The years 1955 to 1964 were years of tremendous change for the Mennonites in Canada. As a major player in many Mennonite institutions during this period, JJ frequently found himself at the centre of these shifting winds. His approach to change was not to resist it, but neither to embrace it unquestioningly. Rather, he chose to navigate a course of compromise that might not please everyone, but that could at least be accepted or tolerated by the majority. Above all, he wanted to avoid division and to maintain unity—unity between old and young, between German-speaker and English-speaker, between traditionalist and innovator. Sometimes he took leadership in effecting certain accommodations; other times he followed the lead of others.

JJ's penchant for mediation, moderation and compromise frustrated some people greatly. They complained that he was wishy-washy and that they did not know where he stood. People on one end of the spectrum felt that he was too quick to give in to the other side. Thus some of the more conservative *Ältesten* grumbled about his concessions to the young radicals, whereas some of the younger radicals felt he was too beholden to the *Ältesten*. Others accused him of being totally unprincipled and simply bending the way the wind blew.<sup>87</sup> In a sense pragmatic and political considerations were more important for JJ than perhaps they should have been.

Yet it was this same mediating quality which allowed him to build bridges between those of divergent experiences and perspectives. It enabled him to befriend an amazingly diverse group of people. And it helped him to prevent division within congregations, conferences and institutions at a time when the possibilities for such division were very real. This quality caused one young member of First Mennonite Church to say about him:

Mr. Thiessen is the last of the old, and the first of the new. He is the one man who can still really understand the old Mennonite way of life, but who can understand and foresee the new . . . Canadian Mennonite way of life.<sup>88</sup>

1964–1977

**Passing the Torch**

On August 31, 1963 JJ observed his seventieth birthday. The following day the senior *Frauenverein* hosted a birthday celebration at the church. Many friends and members of the congregation dropped by to chat, deliver a card and offer their well wishes. Several offered a song or a recitation. JJ basked in the love and affection showered upon him at occasions such as these. He wrote, “One feels so humble and unworthy when showered with so much love and friendship.”<sup>1</sup>

**Letting Go of Leadership**

On a warm fall day two weeks later JJ installed Edward Enns as new assistant pastor at First Mennonite Church. (He had been ordained for the ministry previously.) Enns had grown up in the Sommerfelder Church in southern Manitoba, had studied at CMBC and gone on to teach at the Bible school in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Most recently he had taught at Rosthern Junior College. Although a relatively young man with a preference for English, he could preach well in German. Enns’ wife Elizabeth was a daughter of JJ’s old friends, William and Katharina Enns, of Springstein, Manitoba.

Despite JJ’s age, few people anticipated that he would promptly announce his intention to resign as *Ältester* of the church. He was still hale and hearty and it was not customary for leaders to step back from centre stage until health concerns demanded this. But JJ felt it was important to make arrangements for the future and to do so before an emergency struck. He had witnessed too many situations where leading ministers suddenly died or became incapacitated and their congregations were left floundering because no provisions had been made for a successor. He was determined that this not happen at First Mennonite. He wrote to his brother Abram and sister Mariechen in the Soviet Union as follows:

It is almost comical that I should make these plans while I am still in such good health. And yet, God knows, I am in the age bracket where strokes, heart attacks or paralysis could strike. It would cause me great pain if I did not know that the church ship had a good captain and that

the congregational work was organized and carried forward purposefully. Man proposes and God disposes even in this situation.<sup>2</sup>

At a church council meeting on December 17, 1963 JJ formally submitted his resignation as *Ältester* of First Mennonite Church. The resignation was to take effect on January 1, 1964. A big question that surfaced at the meeting was: What would JJ's status be after that date? Since *Ältesten* did not as a rule resign while they were still well, there were few precedents to go by. A small committee was appointed to bring a recommendation, but it was anxious and at a loss. Also, it only had two weeks to deliberate. Fortunately for the committee members, JJ had worked things out in his mind and when they had their first meeting he simply informed them, "We will do it this way." His plan was that he would continue to assist with German preaching and German Bible study, with communion services and visitation. He would serve as an ex-officio member of the church council for one year after his retirement and would help to establish a church archives. Edward Enns later added that JJ's official designation would be "Elder Emeritus." On December 30 the special committee presented JJ's and Ed's suggestions to the council as recommendations and they were approved. According to one source, there was a great sigh of relief with the resolution of this potentially difficult issue.<sup>3</sup>

On the cold first morning of 1964 Edward Enns was ordained by JJ as new *Ältester* of First Mennonite Church. The sanctuary was filled to overflowing for the special worship service; many guests had to listen to the proceedings over loudspeakers in the church basement. The service drew attention to the way in which the momentous occasion represented both continuity and change. Continuity was symbolized by the fact that Enns was ordained as an *Ältester* at a time when a growing number of congregations was abandoning this practice. Change was symbolized by the fact that JJ would no longer serve as *Ältester*, the role he had filled since 1938 when First Mennonite had become independent. Ed Enns made the comment that the congregation was embarking on a new chapter in its history, but a chapter that would nevertheless be found in the same book.<sup>4</sup>

The leadership transition actually happened quite smoothly. One reason was that in February 1964 JJ and Tina left for a four-month trip to South America and Europe. This vacation was financed by the congregation as a gift for their many years of dedicated service. Upon their return, JJ was hospitalized for several weeks due to a heart ailment. This meant that Enns had a significant period of time in which to establish himself as new *Ältester* and to gain the loyalty of the congregation.

More important for the transition than JJ's absence, however, were the personalities of the two men. Enns was by nature patient, tolerant, not easily threatened and, by his own admission, "not one to rock the boat." He was not interested in making radical changes that would upset the sensitivities of the congregation. He recognized that not having JJ at the helm was, in and of itself, a significant change, and he was committed to making the transition as peaceful as possible.

JJ also tried to make the transition work. He encouraged church members to consider Enns their new *Ältester* and to turn to him with their needs. When people insisted on having JJ officiate at their wedding or the funeral of their loved one, he kept Enns informed of this. If an emergency call went first to JJ, he would quickly telephone Enns, and off they would go to the hospital together. The fact that Enns had a car and JJ did not reinforced this arrangement. Sometimes JJ's exuberance and energy and the patterns he had developed over so many years of leadership caused him to forget that he was no longer the *Ältester*. But, observers felt that, in many ways, he handed over the reins with considerable grace. Years later, Enns would summarize their relationship of one as "walking together." "Carefully we walked together, he remaining my colleague in a helpful and meaningful way, yet being very careful to identify me as his pastor. And I walked with him as he adjusted to not being in charge anymore. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

No longer in the leadership role, JJ nevertheless continued to take a keen interest in the life and work of First Mennonite. He was especially excited about the organization in 1966 of a third "daughter" congregation, namely, Nutana Park Mennonite Church. Nutana Park was a newer neighbourhood on the south-east edge of the city. Since quite a few First Mennonite families lived in that district, First Mennonite had considered constructing its new building there in the 1950s but that idea was dropped. When the First Mennonite membership reached 500 in 1964, JJ and others began to advocate for "planting" a brand new congregation in Nutana Park. It was JJ's conviction that smaller congregations located close to where people lived were more effective in nurturing their members than larger distant ones—the experience with Pleasant Hill and Mayfair had borne that out. A new church building was dedicated on June 13, 1965, and the Nutana Park Mennonite Church formally organized on January 3, 1966.<sup>6</sup> Included in the membership of the new congregation were 76 individuals transferring their membership from First Mennonite.

At First Mennonite JJ still assisted with preaching and teaching and visitation. He continued to conduct weddings when asked and lead funerals jointly with Enns. He attended council and congregational

meetings faithfully, moving and seconding many resolutions and speaking his mind. The original agreement when JJ retired was that he would attend council only for one year and do so as an *ex-officio* member. Whether people forgot about these limitations, or could simply not bring themselves to enforce them, is unclear—JJ continued to attend and to act as a full-fledged member. Moreover, his word and, more than that, simply his presence continued to influence discussions significantly. Robert Krahn, a young lay person elected as church council chair in the 1970s, remembered how JJ signalled him at meetings, indicating whether it was time to take a vote, allow more discussion or move on to another topic.<sup>7</sup> If JJ had stepped aside as *Ältester*, he nevertheless clearly remained on the scene.

His resignation from the role of *Ältester* was followed by his stepping down from other areas of involvement. In 1964 he resigned from the Mennonite Central Committee Executive Committee and two years later from the Mennonite Central Committee Canada board. In 1966 he terminated as chair of the board of directors of CMBC, although he was promptly named “honourary member for life.” As long as his health held out, he continued to make his “pilgrimage to Mecca” to attend CMBC board meetings, opening programs and graduations. He also continued to attend the annual sessions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, regardless of where they were held. He loved these opportunities to meet old friends and new ones, join in the discussions and feel the pulse of conference life and work. He served on *Der Bote* editorial committee until 1977, though not as chairperson.

JJ had known that the day would come when he would need to step back from leadership and he had planned deliberately and intentionally for that. To friends he wrote, “. . . the time has come that the older generation is handing over the torch to the younger generation. . . .”<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, he referred to the old guard moving off the scene and the arrival of a new guard of young workers. For the most part, he was able to let go graciously. He was thankful for the many opportunities that had been given him to serve and to lead and was happy that younger men and women were eager to assume leadership in the congregation and wider church arena. He had a great deal of faith and hope in this new guard. “Thanks be to God that the Lord always finds the necessary workers and provides them with work,” he wrote to his sister Margareta in Ontario.<sup>9</sup>

### **Retirement**

From February to May 1964 JJ and Tina travelled in South America and Europe. Just prior to their departure, JJ received the gift of a dictaphone from his old friend, A.A. Shelly. A former member of First



*In later life JJ and Tina enjoyed more leisure time together.*

Mennonite, Shelly had provided JJ with a typewriter in his early years of ministry and had also paid for his expensive medications during the Thirties. Shelly had left the church during the war over the language issue and had eventually moved to Calgary. Nevertheless, he and JJ had remained friends and had kept in touch. Shelly's gift of the dictaphone was a great help to JJ, especially on his travels. It replaced the typewriter as a "steady companion and servant."

The trip to South America and Europe was more of a vacation than any previous international excursion. They visited Inca ruins in Peru, Atlantic beaches in Brazil, tulip fields in the Netherlands and Alpine mountains in Switzerland. JJ's chief interest, however, was the Mennonite churches and communities that they visited along the way. A major highlight was to return to Paraguay and the Mennonite colonies there. Both JJ and Tina were astonished at the improvements that had taken place over 14 years. The most amazing thing was a new highway connecting the capital city of Asuncion with the colonies in the Chaco.

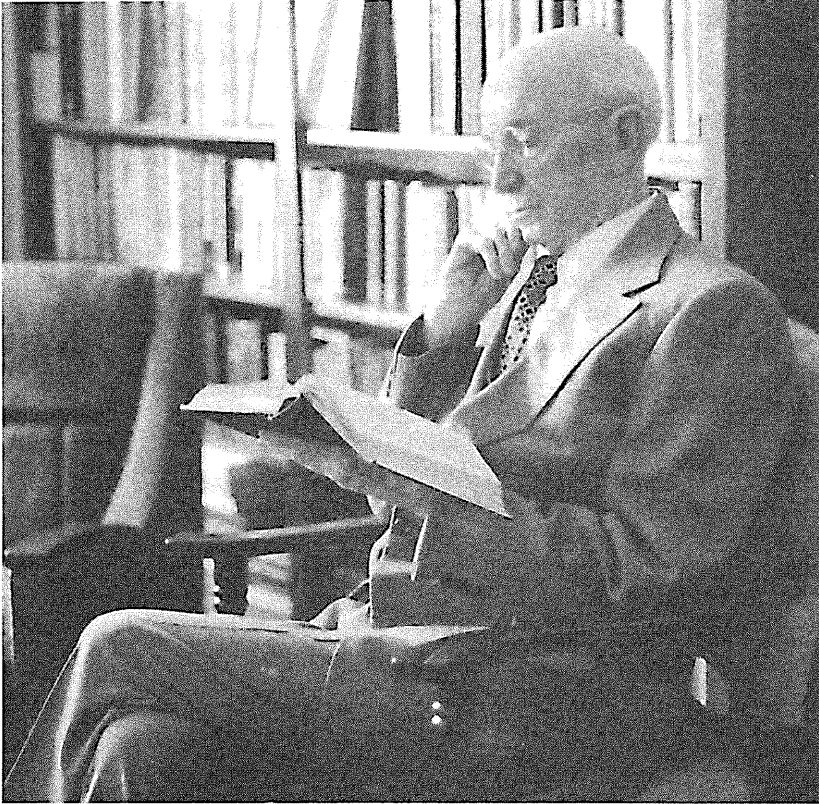


A journey that had previously lasted four days and included travel by land, water and air was now easily accomplished in less than a day. The one disappointment JJ noted was that continuing emigration from the colonies (to Canada and elsewhere) prevented even greater improvement.

For years JJ had made it a habit, when visiting various cities, of scouring the local telephone directory for persons with traditional Russian Mennonite names and then phoning them. He continued this practice even while travelling internationally. In Lima, Peru on this 1964 trip, he discovered the name Alberto Thiessen in the phone book. He was greatly excited—could this man possibly be a relative? With the assistance of a travel agent who also served as interpreter, he located Alberto at the tourist office where he was a manager. In the course of their lengthy discussion, JJ learned that Alberto was a devout Catholic who had lived his whole life in Lima. His parents had died while he was young and he did not know the history of his family name. This was the first time Alberto had met someone who shared the name Thiessen. JJ and Alberto parted with a warm handshake.

In 1965 JJ travelled to Mexico at the request of the General Conference Mission Board to visit the mission stations and to serve as a pastor to mission workers there. In 1967 he attended the Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam. This was the fifth and last time he participated in this global gathering of brothers and sisters in the faith.

If JJ used the word “retirement” to describe his life after 1964, the term was not very accurate, at least for the first several years. As long as possible, he kept a vigorous pace and a routine not very different from what it had always been. He rose at 7 a.m. and by 9 a.m. was in his study at the front of the house. There he read his Bible and prayed, counselled with church members and dictated letters. Katie Hooge came over several mornings a week to type his many letters. When she was not available, JJ’s granddaughters Judi Loewen or, later, Barbara Derksen, assisted him. In the afternoon, he often took a short nap on the living room sofa before heading out to make house calls or do hospital visitation. He still used public transportation to get around the city, but he no longer ran to catch the bus. He was known to say, “We used to run for the bus, but now we realize that another will come, so we just walk.”<sup>10</sup> Frequently, he recruited someone from the family or the church to chauffeur him about, but he was also known to flag down a stranger on the street and ask for a ride. On at least one occasion the person he stopped was Mayor Buckwald. Evidently the mayor graciously complied with JJ’s request and delivered him to his destination. After a full day, JJ’s evenings were filled, as they always had been, with church council, Bible study or some other meeting. The difference was that he no longer chaired all these



*JJ reading his Bible.*

meetings. It was often close to midnight by the time he finally crawled into bed. At the end of the day, Tina was known to remark, “Tomorrow don’t disturb the world again at 7 a.m.”<sup>11</sup>

In “retirement” JJ tried to be more helpful around the house. Tina did not always appreciate his assistance since she had been doing all the housework for years and liked it done certain ways. Nevertheless, JJ washed and dried the dishes more regularly than he had before and did other household chores. He even tried mowing the lawn—something which Tina had always done. Unfortunately, his first attempt landed him in the hospital with the symptoms of a heart attack and he remained there for several weeks. In the hospital he shared a room with five other men whom he described as: a Greek Orthodox Ukrainian, a Roman Catholic Italian, a Lutheran Norwegian, an English veteran and an Old Colony Mennonite. In his typical pastory fashion, he got to know each man’s story and held devotions with the group every night.

In 1967 Tina was diagnosed with stomach cancer and most of her stomach was removed surgically. The doctor indicated that the recovery would be slow and that Tina should be relieved of some of her responsibilities in the home. A move to a smaller dwelling was advised. JJ thus put the large house on 3rd Avenue up for sale and rented a small apartment. Tina found it very difficult to leave the home they had lived in for 26 years and she cried hard as it was being emptied.<sup>12</sup> With time, however, both she and JJ were happy in the small apartment. Tina especially appreciated that there were no stairs to climb, no lawn to mow and a much smaller area to keep neat and clean. An arrangement was made with the new owner of the house that JJ could continue to use the front room as his study, since there was no room in the apartment for his desk, books and files. Thereafter he walked to his office several mornings a week where he continued to read, meditate and counsel parishioners.

Economically, JJ and Tina felt secure in a way that they had not during their “working” days. The salary from the Mission Board and the church had always been low and there never had been money for extras, even with the supplemental allowance from the Board of Colonization. When Edward Enns arrived at First Mennonite in 1963, he immediately began drawing a larger salary than JJ had ever received. Nevertheless, around 1960 the church had created a pension fund and, beginning in January 1964, JJ was able to draw on this.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the monthly \$172 from the church, both JJ and Tina also received an amount from the new Canada Pension Plan. Previous generations of seniors had not had access to these kinds of economic supports. From time to time JJ remarked on the fact that he and Tina did not need to fear for their wellbeing as they aged.

### **A Passion for Young People**

JJ had often said that people were his passion. A true extrovert, he loved nothing more than to be with people. He loved working with people—whether in a large conference or an intimate committee meeting. He loved chatting with people—whether a flight attendant, a salesperson or a nurse in the hospital. He loved ministering to people’s spiritual needs—whether a dying man, a lonely widow or a struggling student. Increasingly, in this last period of his life, JJ pointed to this ministry of *Seelsorge* (caring for the soul) as the area of his work which was most meaningful and brought him the most blessing. As long as he could, he continued to visit the sick and elderly and to write pastoral letters to persons in need.

He had always had a warm spot in his heart for young people. From the early days at First Mennonite, he had made a point of befriending

children and young people and supporting and encouraging them. This special interest continued even into old age. In 1968, when JJ was already 75, he travelled with a busload of 34 youth from across western Canada to Estes Park, Colorado, for the triennial sessions of the General Conference. The bus broke down twice and its arrival was delayed by many hours. JJ was somewhat disconcerted not to be on time—he had always prided himself on his punctuality—but he thoroughly enjoyed his time with the teenagers.<sup>14</sup> On the fortieth anniversary of First Mennonite Church in 1972, the young people of the church presented JJ with a special plaque that paid tribute to his friendship with youth.

The “Sixties” were a turbulent decade in North American society with much of the unrest focussed on the younger generation. The war in Vietnam and Canada’s support for it was the trigger for a great deal of this unrest. In the United States, but also in Canada, university and college campuses were at the forefront of opposition to the war effort. As youth protested what many believed a blatantly unjust war, they also began to challenge authority and question tradition in all aspects of life. Resistance to the status quo—the “Establishment”—became part of the search for meaning and relevance. The hippie movement with its long hair, drugs and folk music provided the symbols for this resistance. There was a great deal of talk about the “generation gap”—a breakdown in communication between young people and their parents.

The Mennonite church in Canada was not left untouched by the spirit of the Sixties, although the impact was mild compared to what the wider society experienced. At Simon Fraser University in British Columbia a group of Mennonite students called the Radical Mennonite Union drew up a manifesto attacking the church for authoritarian structures, rigid theology, outdated social morés and support for the political and economic status quo. It demanded a “complete revolutionization of the Mennonite community—structurally, religiously, socially and politically—for the purpose of turning it into a body working for the radical reconstruction of the whole of society.”<sup>15</sup> In 1969 some of the Union’s sentiments set off a storm of controversy at the CMC sessions in Saskatoon. The “Happening” was a special multi-media presentation created by university students, at least one of whom was from the Radical Mennonite Union. Using popular secular music and graphic images of poverty and war, the two-hour event was intended to convey youth’s sense of alienation and also its understanding of hope. It was a very controversial event. *The Canadian Mennonite* estimated that more than 150 people walked out of the hall in protest during the presentation.<sup>16</sup>

The spirit of the Sixties also filtered into CMBC, although in many ways the full impact did not strike until the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> Male students wore



*The late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by student unrest across North America. At CMBC some symbols of student rebellion were guitars, long hair and blue jeans. Photo: MHCA*

their hair longer and began to grow beards. Both men and women wore tattered jeans and became “scruffier” in their appearance. Long-standing expectations and traditions regarding formal graduation ceremonies and even dining hall etiquette were criticized. Coffee house—late-night events where protest music was featured—became common events. In addition to these outward signs of resistance, students were highly critical of the church and used CMBC as their base to challenge those things that their home congregations and their parents stood for.<sup>18</sup> The words of a photo essay which appeared in the 1969 CMBC yearbook reflect the spirit of questioning present among students at the time:

queries . . .  
the eternal search,  
the ever-present why?  
and how?  
questioning theories, concepts, values,  
cmbc,  
ourselves.  
where  
will we find answers?  
sometimes  
questions  
are the only  
answers.<sup>19</sup>

Not surprisingly, CMBC came under serious criticism for how students looked and acted during this period. Each summer, the college board could expect to be grilled at the annual CMC convention. Year after year, upon giving his report to the conference delegates, college president Henry Poettcker braced himself for accusations that he was not taking a strong enough line against student rebellion. He pled for tolerance and understanding. It was his hope, as well as that of the faculty, that CMBC could be a place where Mennonite youth would give the church one last chance.<sup>20</sup> He did not want to confirm the students' perception that they, their questions and their insights were not welcome in the church.

How did JJ feel about the spirit of the Sixties as it manifest itself among Mennonite youth? His response to the "Happening" at the 1969 CMC conference in Saskatoon was probably a good indication of his sentiments. Many of his contemporaries, as well as people much younger than himself, were deeply offended by the presentation. His family members, friends and parishioners were especially hurt that JJ and Tina's picture had been flashed on the screen during the "Happening" to the tune of the popular Beatles' song, "When I'm 64." They felt their father and *Alttester* had been grievously insulted. JJ himself was rather non-plussed about the whole thing and shrugged it off.<sup>21</sup> In his mind there was no reason to be upset by something that represented a genuine and earnest search for truth.



*JJ in conversation with a CMBC student. He continued to make regular visits to the college he loved until a short time before his death. Photo: MHCA*

Although JJ was no longer chair of the CMBC board, he continued to take a keen interest in developments at the college, still attending board meetings as an honorary member. He continued to attend the fall opening program and spring graduation. At CMBC, too, he exhibited the same patience and tolerance with student explorations. No doubt he was concerned about some of the trends that he observed—not so much things like clothing and hairstyle, but the fact that students were reluctant to make explicit faith commitments. President Henry Poettcker was aware of this and sensed JJ's disappointment that the faculty did not take stronger leadership in this area.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, JJ made sure to publicly defend the college, its faculty and its students. Frequently, during tense CMC conference debates about the college, he stood up and called for delegates to support and pray for the school. In 1969, in response to criticism about student behaviour, he indicated that many of the problems had their roots in the students' families and home communities. The minutes of the 1971 CMC sessions recorded that he exhorted delegates to pray for the school and for the students "whether they have long hair or not." More importantly, he continued to relate to students as individuals with valid feelings and concerns, and he did not let things like long hair or torn jeans become obstacles to those relationships. He endeared himself to the 1972 graduating class in particular when, at the conclusion of his meditation, he flashed the "peace sign."<sup>23</sup> The sign of the first two fingers raised in "V" formation was widely associated with the hippie and anti-war movement.

What was in the Sixties and Seventies called the "generation gap," JJ knew from his youth as the issue of "fathers and sons." From the time he had attended the 1917 Congress in Orloff and first encountered this phenomenon, he had carried a special passion for unity across the generations. He knew that each generation had to struggle to discern what faith meant for its particular time and context, and that there could be widely differing views and tensions as a result. He understood that his grandchildren, growing up in Canada in the Sixties, would have vastly different notions than he had in pre-World War I Russia of how to live faithfully as Mennonite Christians. At the same time, he believed very deeply that the church needed his grandchildren and their generation as much as, perhaps even more than, it needed his own generation. In his view, it was extremely important that the church keep on communicating with its youth, even when some of them seemed (to older folks) to be straying from the straight and narrow path of faith. JJ's deep commitment to a church that embraced young and old helped him to be more tolerant and open to the youth of the Sixties than many of his peers were.

### The Family

The Thiessen family continued to grow and to welcome new members into the fold. In 1964, 36-year-old Walter announced his engagement to Edna Kruger, a gifted musician like himself. Except for his several years in Vienna, JJ and Tina's only son had lived with his parents all his life. JJ seemed quite relieved that Walter was finally getting married and establishing his own home. Tina's emotions were mixed. Walter had been her companion at home during JJ's busiest and most absent years, and they had a very special relationship. She took the news of the engagement "bravely."<sup>24</sup> The wedding occurred on June 26, 1965.

Another important wedding was that of young Vic, son of daughter Hedio and son-in-law Victor Loewen, who had died tragically in 1954. Judy Bachman and Vic were also married in 1965. Their daughter Dawna, JJ and Tina's first great-grandchild, was born within the year. Granddaughter Barbara Derksen married Raymon Montalbetti in 1973. Some members of the family were worried about how JJ would respond



*Walter Thiessen and Edna Kruger on their wedding day in 1965.*



when these first grandchildren chose spouses who were not Mennonites. He evidently took it in stride and with more good humour than he would have in earlier years if one of his own children had chosen to marry someone from outside the family of faith. At the engagement of Barbara and Raymon, JJ was overheard to remark that their children would be very bright because the parents did not share the same Mennonite gene pool!<sup>25</sup>

In this period of his life he had more time for his grandchildren. Until now Tina had been the one who had spent time with them; now JJ did too. He loved it when the grandchildren stopped by his office to hear a story from the past or to examine some of the special mementos that he had collected during his life. They in turn were awed to examine the scar on top of Grandpa's head, a permanent reminder of the civil war in Russia, and to hear about exotic places like Paraguay and Brazil. JJ was thrilled when the Wiens and Derksen children chose to attend Rosthern Junior College and some of them also Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg. While they were away from home, he wrote letters to them, encouraging them in their studies, inquiring into their activities and counselling them in their faith. He took a special interest when teenage granddaughter Beverly Wiens was diagnosed with diabetes in 1976; it was a common bond they shared. In the hope of encouraging her he wrote,

Sugar diabetes has been my companion for many years. It is not too bad, but you have to learn to live with it. I have been travelling far and wide, in spite of this handicap, have enjoyed meals, but sometimes I have envied people while they enjoyed . . . their apple pie. I haven't touched sugar in all these years. . . . My life has been as sweet as that of anyone else. I praise the Lord for this cross which He helps me bear.<sup>26</sup>

As the Thiessen family grew, it also disbursed more widely. In 1965 Katherine and Jake Wiens moved to Ames, Iowa, for Jake to pursue a PhD in agricultural economics. When they returned to Canada two years later they settled in Regina where Jake's federal government job was located. All three Wiens grandchildren—Jim, Gerry and Bev—returned to Saskatoon for university studies and once again saw their grandparents frequently. Grandson Vic and Judy Loewen and their children moved to Calgary, while granddaughter Barbara and her husband Raymon followed the example of Uncle Walter and moved to Vienna for Barbara to do advanced studies in voice. JJ was thrilled that Barbara learned German while in Europe—the Derksens had always spoken English in the home—and he wrote a number of German letters to her.

### Recalling the Past

During most of his life, JJ had been thinking of the future; in retirement his thoughts and reflections increasingly turned to the past. He reflected much on his family of origin, his early life in Russia and the formative experiences of those years. At the encouragement of family and friends, he began to write some memoirs in 1964. He worked on these in rather haphazard fashion, jumping about in his chronology and writing a few pages now and then when his mind turned to a specific memory. He got as far as describing the very early experiences in Canada and then he stopped. Entitled, “God’s Leading in my Life,” the primary theme of these writings was gratitude to God for guidance and faithfulness through times of suffering and times of joy. Frequently he shared these writings with P.B. Wiens who published them in *Der Bote*.

As he wrote, JJ became nostalgic about the old home of Klippenfeld. He wrote to some friends who also had roots there,

. . . Our lovely Klippenfeld is located on the Tokmachka, with its gardens and fields, attractive garden paths amid magnificent flower beds. Thousands of memories surface in the twinkling of an eye. I almost forgot to mention the cliffs on the other side of the river and the happy singing and music of the young people. It is unfortunate that so few pictures were taken and that tape recorders had not yet been invented. I wish we could find someone among our former Klippenfelders who would write about our home village for posterity—its layout, the parks, the manners and customs—as a song from the long distant past. . . .<sup>27</sup>

JJ eagerly awaited news about Klippenfeld from his brother Abram who made the long journey from his home in Orenburg to Ukraine and to Klippenfeld around 1970. It pained him deeply to learn that Klippenfeld was no more and would only be a name in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*.

After 1964 JJ’s correspondence with his brother and sister in Russia increased in frequency. He longed to be reunited with them. He worried a great deal about brother Abram, now known as Leonid, who had been orphaned as a young boy, had spent years in a labour camp and had married a Russian woman who knew nothing of the Mennonite faith and heritage. In later years Abram took to drinking and got deep into debt. Concerned that Abram had abandoned the faith, JJ began to send him copies of some of his sermons in the hope that these would help him rediscover God’s love for him. He also began to make arrangements for Abram to visit Canada in 1973, but Abram’s health failed and the journey became impossible. The younger brother died in 1976. When JJ informed his sisters in Ontario of the death of their brother he expressed the hope that “Abram will have found his way back [to the faith].”<sup>28</sup>

The marking of milestones and anniversaries was another way of honouring and reflecting on the past. Anniversaries had always been important to JJ and they became even more significant at this point in his life. As always, these events consisted of a special worship service, reflecting on and giving thanks for God's goodness, followed by a meal of coffee and pastries and a time of informal reminiscing.

In May 1965 JJ and Tina travelled to Steinbach, Manitoba, for a reunion of the 1912 graduating class of the Halbstadt pedagogical program. Before disbursing in many directions, the 17 members of the class had vowed to meet for a reunion five years after their graduation. Because of the tremendous political, social and economic upheaval of the next decade, that reunion did not occur. Forty-three years later, at the initiative of C.H. Thiessen of Leamington, the five surviving members and their wives gathered to remember their years in Halbstadt and to reflect on their lives since that time. Of the 12 who had already passed away, only three had died of natural causes; the remaining nine had either starved, been shot or died in exile.<sup>29</sup> Their revered religion instructor, Ältester Abram A. Klassen, had also died violently. The spirit of the reunion was poignant as the five imagined the unspeakable suffering which their comrades had undergone. Within four years of the reunion only JJ and one of the other five were still alive.

There were other anniversaries. In 1967 JJ and Tina celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. The speakers at this event focussed a great deal more on JJ's work in the church and Tina's support of it rather than on JJ and Tina's marriage relationship. In 1970 First Mennonite Church commemorated the fortieth anniversary of JJ's ministry. The year 1972 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the beginning of his teaching career in Tiegengagen. This anniversary coincided with another birthday party—JJ's 79th. Three of his former students from Tiegengagen were present at this event to share their memories of him as their teacher. JJ became very sentimental on this occasion and wept openly. The year 1972 was also the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of CMBC. The college chose to commemorate its quarter century history with the publication of a book of essays on Canadian Mennonite studies entitled *Call to Faithfulness*, edited by Henry Poettcker and Rudy Regehr. The book was dedicated to JJ and Tina as a way of honouring their "unstinting labors (sic) of love for our Mennonite people." The preface to the book described the college as "the institution which Rev. Thiessen saw in his dreams 30 years ago, which he led through the infancy stages when the steps were short and somewhat uncertain, and which he then guided into a full-blown youth with vigor (sic) and vitality."<sup>30</sup> Usually, JJ quite enjoyed being in the limelight, but on the occasion when the book was

presented to him he was uncomfortable. He was aware that some of his colleagues were hurt that he received so many accolades and their contributions went unacknowledged. In an interview a few months after the ceremony, he was quite embarrassed when he was once again referred to as the “father” of the school.<sup>31</sup>

JJ had a sense of history—not only his own personal story but the story of his people. For this reason he had persisted in his efforts to have a history of the work of the Board of Colonization written, even when it seemed there was no one to take on the momentous task. Similarly, he had encouraged B.B. Janz to write his memoirs and perspectives on the 1920s immigration before it was too late. This sense of history and the knowledge that he had been part of significant historical developments motivated JJ to deposit his personal papers in the CMC archives in the mid-1970s. He had kept most but not all of his correspondence from the time of his arrival in Saskatoon in 1930. These materials covered his work in the local church and *Mädchenheim*, his involvement with various boards and committees and also some personal letters. Beginning in 1975 he packed up these files and sent them to Winnipeg with Professor T.D. Regehr of the University of Saskatchewan. At one point in his life, JJ claimed that he sent out an average of ten letters per day. It is not possible to verify this number, but the initial collection of papers deposited at the archives consisted of 14 large cartons—no small amount. More materials came at a later date. Other items like sermons, family photos and memorabilia remained in the possession of the family.

### **In God’s Hands**

As the years went by, JJ experienced a deepening sense of being in God’s hands. His relationship with God had always been central to his life; what was different now was that he knew his remaining time on earth was limited and that each day was a day of grace. He spoke of living “on borrowed time” and qualified any future plans with the phrase, “God willing.” He wrote to Jacob Gerbrandt, his old friend and co-worker from the Board of Colonization, “In the final analysis our life was given to us by the Lord, sustained until now and it is His prerogative to issue the final summons. When [the summons comes], then we surrender unconditionally, knowing that we are being called to occupy the mansions Christ prepared for us.”<sup>32</sup>

JJ had few regrets in his later years. To be sure, he was aware of mistakes that he had committed over his life. For instance, when a history of Rosthern Junior College was published, chronicling rather unsympathetically and in great detail the board’s dismissal of P.P. Rempel in 1950, JJ recalled those events with sadness. In a letter to the author, he

noted that the manuscript, “shows us how weak and how human our actions are in difficult situations confronting us, in spite of our piety. Truly, the history of RJC is very interesting, but also humiliating. . . .”<sup>33</sup> He also admitted to having erred when he declined to marry a couple because one of the partners had been divorced.<sup>34</sup> But, for a number of reasons, JJ did not allow past failings to overwhelm him in these closing years. There were a number of reasons for this. First of all, there is evidence that he made deliberate attempts to be reconciled with some individuals whom he had crossed over the years. For instance, when he encountered David Janzen in the 1960s in Ontario, he apologized to him for his dismissal from CMBC in 1958.<sup>35</sup> A rough note in a folder of correspondence with Walter Quiring suggests that JJ may also have tried to make things right with the former editor of *Der Bote*—not by apologizing for taking a certain stance but by accepting responsibility for the breakdown in their relationship.<sup>36</sup> He had long been reconciled with Johann H. Enns of Winnipeg’s First Mennonite Church. It seems that reconciliation with Arnold Regier, first president of CMBC, did not happen and may not even have been attempted. For Regier, there would be ongoing disappointment for the way in which JJ had allowed him to become the scapegoat for people’s anxieties about the college.<sup>37</sup>

Another reason that JJ experienced few regrets is that to his dying day he remained the optimist. As always, he was drawn to the positive rather than the negative or, to use a favourite expression, the doughnut rather than its hole. He wrote to friends, “. . . yes, I have been feeling sometimes very poor, short of good performance and bothered with doubts and fear. By the grace of God I was able to find my balance, remembering that the pessimist sees the hole in the doughnut while the optimist sees and enjoyed (sic) the dough.”<sup>38</sup> Above all, he had a profound sense that his sins had been forgiven and that he did not need to go to his grave burdened with guilt.

JJ’s optimistic and positive nature also enabled him to look back across the years and regard his life as blessed rather than cursed. Certainly he had experienced much that could have caused him to be bitter and resentful: the terror of civil war, the death of a firstborn, the loss of homeland and profession, the banishment of family members under Stalin’s regime. He did not deny these losses and their impact. “These physical and psychological hardships,” he wrote, “are deeply engraved in body and soul.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, somehow he saw the hardships as bound up with the gracious blessings that he believed God had bestowed upon him. Indeed, he did not separate life’s tragedies from God’s blessings, and did not believe that good times represented God’s blessing and that bad times represented the withholding of blessing. He was

convinced that in some mysterious way, both blessing and curse, joy and sorrow, were ultimately in God's hands and part of God's larger purpose for humanity.

One could take issue with JJ's theology of suffering—or at least the conclusions to be drawn from it—and ask some probing questions. For instance, if blessing and curse were both in God's hands, did this mean that God allowed or even caused evil to happen? Did it mean that the deaths of millions under Stalin were possibly part of God's plan or that the suffering of innocent children and the tearing apart of families were in keeping with God's will? Moreover, if God somehow used evil and suffering for good purpose, did this mean that Christians must accept suffering with stoicism and resignation? Or, on the other extreme, could humans argue that their use of violence was justified if employed for a greater good?

It does not appear that JJ was aware of the problems related to his theology. He was, after all, not a theologian but simply someone who through his life had sought to understand and be faithful to God. His reading of the scriptures and his experience had taught him that human suffering was not outside of God's activity in the world. For him, God was in charge of the universe and of history. If that meant God was somehow party to tragedy and violence, he could accept this as a mystery that was beyond human comprehension. Ultimately God's rule would triumph and evil and suffering would be no more. In the meantime, it was the Christian's calling to be thankful in all circumstances.

It was this understanding which enabled JJ to make sense of his life experience and the experience of his people, the Russian Mennonites of the twentieth century. It also enabled him to live out his declining years with a spirit of gratitude. Even though his body was weakening, he could be thankful for a sound mind and a soul at peace. Even though he could no longer work as he had previously, he could rejoice for the many opportunities that he had been given to work and to serve. Even though he no longer exercised leadership in various areas of church activity, he could be grateful that there were younger people who were eagerly taking up the torch. Only in letters to a few old friends in circumstances like his own did he acknowledge the pain of letting go of those things which previously had given his life so much meaning. In June 1977 he confided to his co-worker in CMRIC, C.A. DeFehr:

We are thankful to God that, to a certain degree, we can still take part in public life. It is difficult when hearing, eyesight and memory are restricted due to old age and one feels useless.<sup>40</sup>

Elsewhere JJ revealed twinges of sadness as he realized that his participation in church affairs was limited now to reading reports, listening to discussions and observing the work of others. One of the things that gave him great joy in his later years was when he encountered an old co-worker from the conference, CMBC or the Board of Colonization and reminisced about those days of labouring together “in the harness of the Lord and the church.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Health Struggles**

In 1973 JJ reached the ripe age of 80 years. Increasingly he was feeling the limitations of his body. His diabetes became more volatile. His heart grew weaker—“perhaps I have loved too much,” he conjectured.<sup>42</sup> His weight, which had once exceeded 200 pounds, dropped considerably. Arthritis required the use of a cane. He moved from what he had called “semi-retirement” to “full retirement.” He accepted only occasional preaching assignments and declined to serve at weddings and funerals. The last wedding he performed was that of his granddaughter Barbara Derksen on July 28, 1973. The last funeral at which he served was that of Peter Fast on July 10, 1975. Over the years he had officiated at over 350 weddings and more than 250 funerals. By late 1976 he also discontinued making his beloved hospital visits because of hearing loss and increasing frailty.

While he showed increasing signs of age, Tina carried on like a much younger woman. Despite all her illness during the first decade in Canada and her encounter with stomach cancer in 1967, she enjoyed good health into her eighties. She continued to fill her days with cooking and baking, sewing and crocheting things of beauty, writing letters, and easily walking a distance of ten city blocks. She continued to hold herself straight and upright and was never stooped. As always, her appearance was important to her; she continued to wear stylish dresses and keep her Saturday morning appointment with the hairdresser.

Although Tina was still well and also able to tend to most of JJ’s needs, family members began to make preparations for a time when both would be in need of care. On their own Helen and Merv Derksen began to build an apartment for JJ and Tina onto their family home on 6th Avenue. The apartment was completely separate and private from the Derksens’ house, but family members were only seconds away. Merv installed a buzzer system so that either JJ or Tina could summon help if it was needed. They moved in on November 30, 1976, just after JJ’s diabetes had landed him in hospital once again. They were very happy in their “nice, cozy quarters.”<sup>43</sup> One of the special treats about living there was almost daily visits from David Derksen, youngest son of Helen and



*In 1976 JJ and Tina moved into a small apartment which their children, Helen and Merv Derksen, built onto their house.*

Merv, who still lived at home and often dropped in after school to see Grandma and Grandpa.<sup>44</sup>

### **Last Days**

The year 1977 opened with JJ once again planning to travel. Despite the fact that he no longer held any official role in the wider church, it was still important for him to participate in events that were close to his heart. In January, for instance, he flew to Winnipeg to attend the annual meeting of the Council of Boards of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. In May he returned to Winnipeg for the CMBC graduation. His granddaughter Lynne Derksen was among the 30 graduates that year. In early summer he made plans to attend the annual convention of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in Toronto. It was especially important for him to go to Toronto because this would mark the fiftieth time he had participated in the annual meetings of CMC. Since his arrival in Canada in late 1926, he had attended the conference every single year except 1938, when he had been busy with preparations for the GC conference in Saskatoon. He was very proud of this record and hated to miss the occasion. He also saw the trip as an opportunity to visit both Tina's and his own siblings in Ontario. He sensed that this might be the



last time he would see them.<sup>45</sup> Fortunately, JJ's doctor gave him the go ahead to make the journey. JJ and Tina, along with daughter Hedio, were gone July 19–23, 1977. For JJ a highlight of the trip were the moments at the CMC conference when the delegates acknowledged his record of attendance and gave him a round of applause. For some people, his public comments seemed awkward and out of place—his era was long over.<sup>46</sup> For him the occasion was simply a way of linking his experience with the present moment. He returned home to Saskatoon exhausted, but feeling richly blessed.

In the weeks following their parents' return from Ontario, the Thiessen children—Hedio, Katherine, Helen and Walter—began planning a celebration to mark JJ and Tina's sixtieth wedding anniversary. The church building was reserved, Henry Poettcker of CMBC was contacted to bring the message and invitations were printed and mailed. The worship service was to take place on Saturday, September 3, at 2:00 p.m., with a meal to follow. As JJ contemplated the anniversary and the significance of sharing 60 years of marriage with Tina, he grew quite sentimental. In a touching expression of love and affection, he wrote to nephew Gerhard and wife Ilse Thiessen:

When I recall how many sacrifices my wife has made over the decades of our work in church, conference, social life and mission, then I am overcome by a deep feeling of indebtedness. Yet, in spite of all the difficulties in marriage, we have been able to share joy and sorrow for 60 years. What a privilege! No circumstances nor situations nor the enemy of all earthly happiness could weaken or sever our marriage relationship. We thank God for that!<sup>47</sup>

During the month of August JJ spent several half-days in his new office in the First Mennonite Church building. Prior to the Ontario trip, the old house on 3rd Avenue had been sold once again and the new owner had plans to demolish it. Thus, JJ finally vacated the small room at the front of the house that he had occupied for nearly 36 years. This sacred place held many hallowed memories of time spent praying, meditating, writing sermons and counselling church members. He was grateful to have a new room at the new church to call his own, and also grateful that Katie Hooge still made herself available to type letters once or twice a week. Over the years JJ had done much of his own typing, especially his sermons, but by now his frail hands shook so much that he could no longer manage the mechanics of typing and his handwriting had long since become virtually illegible. Of Katie's willingness to continue to assist him, he wrote, "I owe her a debt of gratitude and can never repay her for what she has done for me and my work."<sup>48</sup>

Thursday, August 18, 1977 was the last day that JJ and Katie spent together in the office. He dictated at least seven letters. They reflected his continued pastoral concern for people scattered across the globe. Three letters went to a niece and nephews living in Ontario, a fourth went to a Manitoba cousin whose wife had just died, a fifth went to the medical doctor in Brazil who had cared for JJ and Tina during their trip in 1950 (he had also just lost his wife), a sixth went to members of First Mennonite working in the Philippines, and a seventh to a young nurse working in Saudi Arabia. In many of these letters JJ referred to the upcoming anniversary celebration which would take place, “God willing,” on September 3. He was keenly aware that each day was a gift and that “the final summons” might come at any time, perhaps even in the two-week interval prior to the anniversary. He confided to his Manitoba friend, “It is still a few weeks but anything can happen.”<sup>49</sup> And to the nurse in Saudi Arabia, he wrote, “Now the shadows are lengthening and we do not know how long or how soon, but the end comes nearer.”<sup>50</sup>

Exactly a week later, on August 25, JJ called his son Walter to drive him to the Air Canada office. He wanted to make a plane reservation to Winnipeg in order to attend the ground-breaking ceremony for a new conference archives building to be named the Mennonite Heritage Centre. From the 1954 purchase of the 20-acre property at 600 Shaftesbury Blvd. in Winnipeg, JJ had shepherded the development of the college and conference campus; he again wished to be present as a new phase of campus expansion got underway. Walter and Edna arrived a short time later, took JJ to the Air Canada office, and then brought him home. They lingered for a moment as he walked up the few steps from the sidewalk to the front door. As they watched, he suddenly collapsed and fell to the ground. An ambulance was called and he was whisked away to the hospital. There it became apparent that he had experienced massive cerebral hemorrhaging and that nothing could save him.<sup>51</sup> Three hours later, at 1:30 p.m. on August 25, 1977 Jacob Johann Thiessen breathed his last breath. Instead of gathering for the sixtieth wedding anniversary on September 3, family and friends came to JJ’s funeral and burial on August 29.

Tina survived JJ by six and a half years. She faced life alone with her typical stoicism and strength. Perhaps the most telling symbol of her grief was that she stayed away from the church building for several months.<sup>52</sup> Her life with JJ had been so bound up with that place that she could not bear to enter the church door for some time. Eventually, however, she resumed her involvement there, returning to the gatherings of the *Frauenverein* and the seniors’ Bible study and to the pew that she had faithfully shared with JJ on Sunday mornings. She returned to those



*Tina continued to enjoy good health well into her eighties. She died quietly in 1984 at the age of 90.*

activities that had always given structure and meaning to her life. During this time she developed a special relationship with her little great-granddaughter, Ileana, who would often sit and rock with her on the rocking chair for long periods of time. She also intentionally assumed some of JJ's activities, writing letters of encouragement to persons with whom he had corresponded and visiting persons whom he had visited. In 1980 First Mennonite Church organized a special event honouring Tina and her contribution to the congregation over a period of 50 years. She died quietly in her sleep on February 20, 1984 at the age of 90.

## Epilogue

In 1999, twenty-two years after J.J. Thiessen's death, *Christian Living* magazine identified him as one of the ten outstanding twentieth century leaders among North American Mennonites. The magazine's editors did not give their reasons for bestowing this honour upon JJ, nor any of the other individuals listed. But perhaps it is fitting to conclude a biography of J.J. Thiessen with a summary of those factors that could make him deserving of such a distinction. Why is it that he left an exceptional mark on the Mennonite "family of faith" in Canada?

First of all, JJ was able to help the Russian Mennonite people—particularly the immigrants of the 1920s—sort out their identity in the land of Canada. He reassured them that they could remain firmly rooted in the faith, even if the context within which they found themselves was drastically different from what they had known in Russia. They could still be Mennonites, even if they no longer spoke exclusively German or lived in closed rural communities. JJ demonstrated this by deliberately learning English and moving to the city. For him, the essentials of Anabaptist-Mennonite faith were what mattered: an experience of salvation in Christ, membership and participation in the body of believers (the church) and commitment to a life of discipleship and service. He recognized that the cultural symbols through which faith had found expression in Russia—namely colony, land and language—were precious, but not essential.

Related to this, JJ could adapt to changing times and circumstances. From the context of pre-revolutionary Russia to Canadian society of the 1960s and '70s, he observed an amazing transformation within the Mennonite community. He witnessed his people shift from a primarily rural to an urban lifestyle, from agricultural to professional vocations, and from an existence very separate from the larger society to one much more integrated with it. The pace of change was especially swift in the years following World War II. JJ found himself in the midst of this transition. Because of his ability to adapt to the times, he helped the church navigate its way through changes which some people found exhilarating but others found quite unsettling.

JJ possessed a passion for unity. He held to an understanding of church that embraced young and old, radical and traditionalist. He was committed to building a community of believers which was relevant to

both groups and all those in between. His concern for unity was critical to preserving the cohesion of First Mennonite Church, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and other church institutions at a time when the forces of discord and division could have torn them apart. But this particular strength was also a weakness, for at times JJ seemed more concerned with avoiding a public rift than taking a clear and principled position. The events surrounding the Winnipeg controversy and the dismissal of an RJC teacher were two such instances. In both of these cases, as well as some others, he appeared ready to sacrifice principle for politics.

JJ was a man of vision and hope. He anticipated the issues and the dilemmas that would confront the church in future years, and he worked hard to prepare for those challenges. His basic approach to life was to see the possibilities rather than the problems, the opportunities rather than the obstacles, and he believed that dreams could become realities. His vision and eternal optimism gave him the determination to pursue causes long after others might have given up. The existence of Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg is probably the best example.

JJ had an intuitive sense of how to mobilize and work with people. Whether the need was Sunday school teachers at Pleasant Hill, funds for a building project or mission workers for Paraguay, he knew how to rally people behind a cause. He was a genius at chairing meetings, big or small, and had an uncanny way of dispelling tensions with a joke, a pep talk or moments of prayer. Some people experienced his leadership as manipulative; others recognized him as politically astute.

JJ was above all a person of profound faith. The words of faith were on his lips and the deeds of faith were daily evident in his life. He practised the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading and prayer each day. He also fasted frequently, at least until he was diagnosed with diabetes. At the centre of his world was an unshakeable conviction that he had been saved through grace and that, as a result, he was called to a life of service and discipleship. His faith called forth thanksgiving and praise, even in the midst of trials. His faith inspired faith in others and he was a spiritual mentor to many.

JJ was also human, with human failings. For one thing, he was not without personal ambition. True, his primary motive was to serve and to further God's Kingdom, but he also grew to bask in the power and influence he wielded as leader of so many church institutions. At times it was difficult for him to share that power with others. At other times, he lacked the humility that one would expect of a servant-leader. On occasion he was known to "toot his own horn" and draw attention to his many involvements and accomplishments. Moreover, there was not much

balance between the public and private aspects of his life. Virtually all his waking hours were devoted to the work of the church and very few were left for family or for other pursuits. He failed to recognize that spending time with his wife and children and resting from his labours were also part of building the Kingdom.

Apart from JJ's gifts and abilities as an individual, other factors—"external" ones—enabled him to emerge as a leader. First of all, from early in his life, he was privileged to find himself within influential circles of people. He was by no means part of the wealthy landed class of Mennonite estate owners, but his father's position as village mayor gave him a certain status within the small village of Klippenfeld. As a young adult, his education gave him opportunity to associate with some of the leading men of the Molotschna colony. And as a companion and confidante of David Toews, he was "groomed" for offices which Toews himself held.

Secondly, JJ belonged to a patriarchal Mennonite community. Thus, he was privileged with many more leadership opportunities than if he had been a woman. Pastoral ministry in a local congregation and leadership in the wider church were simply out of the question for women. Not only that, he benefitted greatly from the socially accepted understanding of woman's role as man's helpmate. He could count on the women in his life, especially his wife Tina and assistant Katie Hooge, to support him and enable him to commandeer a vast network of organizations and activities. His contribution would have been greatly diminished without their capable assistance.

Thirdly, JJ emerged as a leader because the Mennonite faith community of his era expected and respected strong leadership. Canadian Mennonite churches, especially those formed by 1920s immigrants from Russia, desperately needed people to provide leadership and guidance. The immigrants were poor and preoccupied with the struggle to survive. They accepted and trusted a system that gave great authority to ministers and *Ältesten*. By the 1960s, a new generation of Canadian-born and educated young men, with new ideas about church leadership, were challenging the traditional structure and style embodied by men like J.J. Thiessen. Yet by this time his days in the limelight were nearing their end. If he been born into this later generation, he likely would not have achieved the stature that he did.

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That J.J. Thiessen was an important leader, there is no doubt. But perhaps, ultimately, his legacy is not as much about leadership as it is

about love. JJ possessed a deep love for people. “My passion is people,” he was known to say frequently. Indeed, of the many tributes paid after his death, it was this quality which was highlighted most often. What people recalled most of all was *not* his leadership in the institutions, but rather, his warm handshake, his listening ear and his affirming spirit. They would recall his ability to remember names, his caring visits at the bedside of the sick and his particular concern for youth. They would bring to mind how he had pointed them toward missions, ministry or service work. They would remember his sense of humour and the twinkle in his eye. Perhaps the greatest homage paid was that, despite his involvement at numerous levels of church leadership, so many ordinary people still called him their friend.

At the heart of J. J. Thiessen’s life was a desire to serve the “family of faith” known as Mennonites, a family in which each member belonged, contributed and was called by name.

# Appendix

## *More Depth!*

A sermon by **J. J. Thiessen**

October 26, 1950

in Asuncion, Paraguay\*

Dear Listeners,

We have gathered here today for a final worship service. The time has come when we must and want to travel back north again. It has been our privilege to spend four full months plus a few days with you in South America. During this time we have come into contact with many brothers and sisters in the Lord. We were able to visit and observe the farmers on their land, to experience something of the joys and hardships of our people in South America and to study the intellectual and spiritual developments in their settlements. We are profoundly grateful for the many contacts with physicians, teachers and church workers, with young people and elderly people, with strong and healthy people as well as with patients in hospitals. Undoubtedly you will want to know our impressions concerning the past, present and future of our settlements in South America. As far as the past and present are concerned you, of course, know what has transpired. As for the future, we are no prophets and can only commend it and all that it holds for you to the almighty God. We believe that he in his grace will abide with us.

To give expression to our impressions we have chosen the words of scripture: "The half has not been told to me!" We have been very pleasantly surprised. In all areas of your pioneer life as settlers we have witnessed and experienced more positive things than we had expected. That is not to say that our settlements with their farms, their schools, their churches and their overall wealth have achieved their high point. Obviously hard work and struggle, praying and fasting will be your lot in the foreseeable future. The Mennonite Central Committee together with other aid organizations under the umbrella of the churches in Canada and the United States will continue to work here to alleviate hardships and to help in guiding the affairs of these settlements.

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\* This sermon was published in *Der Bote* (29 November 1950, 4–5) with the title "Vertiefung." Translation into English is by Gerhard Ens.



A word of Scripture that I would like to quote at this time is found in Colossians 2:6-9a:

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.

The question, "What is the chief need of present day humanity?" one could answer quite simply: "Depth!" Truly, if anything increases from year to year it is superficiality. That is why the admonition to strive for depth is very much in place. With deep concern many of us observe the development of superficiality in the various endeavours of humankind as evidenced in the press, in literature, in the arts, in education and in politics. While quality diminishes, quantity increases. The focus is on mass production and mass consumption. Thus everything has become insufferably common and ordinary. Pleasure in consumerism overshadows every development in depth. Hence the divine cannot find root in the hearts of humankind. The seed of the Word of God sprouts in the hearts of people but the young shoot of faith cannot withstand the slightest attack from the outside because it has no roots; the ground is too shallow to encourage the development of such a network. Our Christianity has developed only horizontally instead of also vertically into the depth of the nourishing soil of God's word. That is why the judgment on the house of the Lord cannot be escaped.

But it is not too late to hope for redemption of all of Christendom. The greatest need of the hour is certainly depth. First of all there must be personal depth which we can obtain through prayer and faith. Depth cannot be obtained by lip service. The Bible speaks of growth and progress in the life of faith. This growth is progress towards depth. The trunk and branches of a tree reflect the growth and development of the root network. The more the roots spread out and develop, the stronger is the structure of the tree. This is probably what Paul means when he says, "rooted and built up in him." We could also say, "grounded and anchored in him through a living faith." Depth therefore means to be anchored in Jesus. This exhortation to depth has its justified place in the church of today, also in our Mennonite brotherhood. For many the biblical Christ is not enough, and they try to slake their thirst at leaking wells. Many have forgotten that the "fulness of deity" dwells in Christ and that all the treasures of wisdom are hidden in him; hidden like precious metals which

cannot be found on the surface but which are deep in the ground so that one has to delve and dig to obtain them. That is how it is with Jesus. From him there is a call “from the deep,” and only by heeding this call can the believer loosen himself from the surface and shallowness of his little cares and joys and experience a real depth of faith and perception. It is to be regretted that many Christians do indeed confess their sins before God but then do not continue and grow in a life of sanctification and strengthening of the inner man. That is why there is so little power emanating from today’s Christianity—no power of attraction, no energy of real life.

And what is the way to such depth? We cannot elicit such growth by a mere command: “More depth!” But how then should we live? The Bible has clear answers. Depth is the fruit of a living relationship with Christ through his word, through prayer and through interaction with mature Christians. The chief reason for the wasting away of our spiritual lives is to be found in the neglect of Scriptures. We have to read them in faith and faithfully and let their contents influence us. We take too little time to read and study the Bible which alone can widen and deepen our spiritual perceptions. We have no time!?! Well, I fully respect the commandment, “Thou shalt not steal!” But in spite of that I say, you’ll just have to steal the time to read and study the Bible. This study of the Word must be accompanied by prayer. The neglect of prayer leads to inner impoverishment. Jesus was in constant prayer. When he fed the multitudes he looked up to heaven; when he called the dead back to life he prayed. When he healed the sick, his eyes were raised heavenward. Brothers and sisters, let us remain steadfast in prayer!

To the study of the Word and prayer we must add the communion of the saints. This communion is grounded in Christ. Throughout my life I have been privileged to associate with persons who stood higher than I did—in education, in faith and in sanctification. I am thinking of the bishops Heinrich Unruh and Johann Klassen; of the teacher Kornelius Wiens and many, many others. From them I have gained very much and through their precepts I have been protected from many spiritual dangers. The communion of the saints finds its climax in the Lord’s Supper.

If we neglect the above God-given ways to a deeper life then there is only one means left, which God has to utilize often enough: I am speaking of suffering. On our own we avoid the depths of suffering as much as possible. We are afraid of it. Our natural desire again looks at the surface of things, to that which we can see, to the lighter things and not the difficult. We have to be thrown into the depths to be freed of the superficiality of our existence, to experience the depth of our existence which is salutary and necessary for us. God’s healing will and his great

love leads us through sorrow and suffering to greater depths in faith and to the sanctification of our lives. The story of the Kingdom of God is overwhelmingly rich in this great truth. But how difficult it is for us to believe that God has good intentions for us when he takes us into the depths of suffering. Suffering is an expression of the loving intentions of God. That is the way it must be. Without suffering we would not have redemption. Jesus had to suffer much for us. Our best Christian hymns have originated through suffering. As a blind man Milton composed his masterpiece "Paradise Lost." Paul's best letters were written in prison. It is in this light that we must view God's leading through the history of our own people. "Do you not know that God's goodness leads to repentance?" There is no more thorough way to be led into an intense Christian experience than to be thrown by God into the depth of suffering.

How do we understand God's ways in this post-war period? Does God have good purposes in mind? He certainly wants to protect us from superficiality and wants to lead us through the depth of the night into his light, from the cross to glory. How is it with each one of our personal quests for depth? What about the life of faith in this congregation? There will have to be persons of deep faith who are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices to lead the congregation into deeper understandings so it becomes what God wants it to be. I wish this congregation God's help and faith for the future. May he in his grace help the strong and the sick, the old and the young to strengthen and deepen their faith.

My dear listeners, I must come to a close. Take this thought with you. Depth shall be the watchword in all areas of our life: congregational, educational, economic and social. And finally, may the Lord give us men who show the way to depth and thoroughness.

Therefore my loved ones, be "rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" [Colossians 2:7]. "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that your are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have" [Philippians 1:27–30].

*Amen.*

# Notes

## Chapter 1: 1893–1907

<sup>1</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, J.J.Thiessen, “Gottes Führungen in meinem Leben,” 7 (hereafter referred to as Memoirs). Many details of the following account are derived from these Memoirs.

<sup>2</sup> CGCA, Frank H. Epp Collection, interview with J.J. Thiessen, 13 January 1973.

<sup>3</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 886, File 211, JJT to “Lieber Bruder Abram mit Familie,” 20 August 1975. Other details of this family account also come from this letter.

<sup>4</sup> The genealogy of the Thiessen and Kornelsen families is found in K. Peters, *Genealogy of Heinrich Kornelsen, 1807–1975* (Winnipeg, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Leonhard Froese, “Das Pädagogische Kultursystem der mennonitischen Siedlungsgruppe in Russland” (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Göttingen, 1949), 8.

<sup>6</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “Ich gedenke meiner Mutter,” *Der Bote*, 22 May 1973, 3. Recollections of his mother and father are the source of details for this account.

<sup>7</sup> Esther Patkau, “J.J. Thiessen’s Ministry in Saskatoon” (Unpublished MST thesis, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, 1979), 130–131.

<sup>8</sup> For repeated references to the fact that fathers did not cry or demonstrate affection, see Arnold Dyck, *Lost in the Steppe*, trans. Henry D. Dyck (Steinbach: Derksen Printers, 1974), 120, 122, 169, 262.

<sup>9</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “Ich gedenke meines lieben Vaters,” *Der Bote*, 3 July 1973, 4.

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the land problem, see James Urry, *None But Saints: The Transformatin of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789–1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989), 196–207.

<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Goerz, *The Molotschna Settlement*, trans. Al Reimer and John B. Toews (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications; Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1995), 137.

<sup>12</sup> MHCA, Peter Braun Archive, Reel 56, File 2184, “School Attendance Records of a Number of Village Schools, 1873–1874.”

<sup>13</sup> Henry Bernard Tiessen, *The Molotschna Colony: Heritage Remembered* (Kitchener: By the author, 1979), 90.

<sup>14</sup> For overviews of the educational system, see Peter Braun, “The Educational System of the Mennonite Colonies in South Russia,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1929): 169–182; and Adolf Ens, “Mennonite Education in Russia,” in John Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia, 1788–1988: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 75–97.

<sup>15</sup> Leonhard Froese, “Das Pädagogische Kultursystem,” 120.

<sup>16</sup> Arnold Dyck, *Lost in the Steppe*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> See Arnold Dyck, *Lost in the Steppe*, 165–171, and Henry Bernard Tiessen, *The Molotschna Colony*, 70, for a description of a typical Russian Mennonite Christmas program.

<sup>18</sup> Memoirs, 10.

<sup>19</sup> For more information on the examination procedures, see Leonhard Froese, “Das Pädagogische Kultursystem,” 124–125; Arnold Dyck, *Lost in the Steppe*, 252–255 and 303–312.

<sup>20</sup> “Ich gedenke meines Vaters,” 4.

<sup>21</sup> Heinrich Goerz, *The Molotschna Settlement*, 158.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Katherine Thiessen Wiens, 18 October 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Esther Patkau, “J.J. Thiessen’s Ministry in Saskatoon,” 131.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Kornelsen was a daughter from Johann’s mother’s first marriage (see page 1). She and her husband Heinrich Voth settled in Minnesota. In the late 1880s, Heinrich was commissioned by the Mennonite Brethren Conference to do mission work in southern Manitoba, where he helped to organize the first Mennonite Brethren church in the Winkler area. Sarah eventually settled in Winkler after her husband’s death in 1918.

<sup>26</sup> David G. Rempel, “The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia: A Sketch of its Founding and Endurance, 1789–1919,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 47 (October 1973): 259–308; 48 (January 1974): 5–54.

<sup>27</sup> Memoirs, 3.

<sup>28</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 886, File 200, JJT to brother Abram, 4 August 1975.

<sup>29</sup> Typically, families without land lived on the edge of the village which placed them, both literally and figuratively, on the periphery of community life.

<sup>30</sup> I am indebted to Rosalee Bender for this idea of identity and “location.” See Rosalee Bender, “Locating Ourselves in ‘Godbecoming,’” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 10 (Winter 1992): 49–58.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Jacob H. Janzen, *Lifting the Veil: Mennonite Life in Russia before the Revolution*, trans. Walter Klaassen (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1998), 85.

<sup>32</sup> Among the older men to whom Jacob would later be drawn were Abram A. Klassen of Halbstadt, Jacob H. Janzen and David Toews.

## Chapter 2: 1907–1914 Student and Teacher

<sup>1</sup> William Schroeder and Helmut T. Huebert, *Mennonite Historical Atlas* (Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 1990), 96; “Gnadenfeld,” *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. II (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), 530–531. Details on Gnadenfeld are mainly from the latter article.

<sup>2</sup> John J. Friesen, “Mennonite Church, 1789–1850,” in J. Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia*, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Goerz, *The Molotschna Settlement*, 128.

<sup>4</sup> As in chapter 1, the main source of biographical information is Thiessen’s Memoirs.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Braun, “The Educational System of the Mennonite Colonies,” 169–182; Leonhard Froese, “Das Pädagogische Kultursystem,” 128–133.

<sup>6</sup> Harry Loewen, “Intellectual Developments among the Mennonites of Russia: 1880–1917,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 8 (1990): 97.

<sup>7</sup> The information on JJT’s teachers is drawn from his memoirs, and P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789–1910)*, translated from the German by J.B. Toews, et al. (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 766–767.

<sup>8</sup> MHCA, Peter Braun Archive, Reel 59, File 2434, “Pedagogical Program in Halbstadt, Record of Students Attending, 1878–1922.”

<sup>9</sup> CGCA, Frank H. Epp Collection, interview with children of JJT, 14 January 1973.

<sup>10</sup> D.P. Enns, “Die mennonitischen Schulen in Russland,” *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch* 65 (Newton: Mennonite Publication Office, 1950), 7–18.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> These materials were stored in various places in Molotschna. When they were carted away by the Soviets in 1929, it was believed they were lost. In 1990 researchers from Canada discovered the bulk of the collection in the Odessa archives. The materials were microfilmed and are now available at several Mennonite archives across Canada, including MHCA, as the Peter Braun Archive.

<sup>13</sup> “Halbstadt Mennonite Church,” *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, 633.

<sup>14</sup> Helene und C.T. Thiessen, “Nach 53 Jahren ein Wiedersehen,” *Steinbach Post*, 6 July 1965, 1. See *Der Bote*, 9 February 1965, 1, for a photo of the 1912 graduating class.

<sup>15</sup> *Memoirs*, 25–26.

<sup>16</sup> *Memoirs*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> The description of Tiegenhagen comes from Margaret Rempel Willms, “Tiegenhagen, von 1901–1925.” I am indebted to Peter Letkeman for sharing this document with me.

<sup>18</sup> K. Peters, comp., *Geneology of Aron Martens, 1754–1977* (Winnipeg, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> A photo of the Tiegenhagen school was published in *Mennonite Life*, 4 (January 1949): 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Memoirs*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with A. Roy Brown, 7 July 1999.

<sup>22</sup> *Memoirs*. The Thiessen Family Collection includes a copy of “Projekt eines Lehrplanes für mennonitische Dorfschulen” which guided Thiessen’s teaching.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews with A. Roy Brown, 7 July 1999; Cornelius Toews, 3 July 1999.

<sup>24</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 269, JJT to P.G. Sawatzy, 24 January 1944.

<sup>25</sup> Heinrich Goerz, *The Molotschna Settlement*, 197.

<sup>26</sup> Interviews with George Konrad, 5 July 1999; A. Roy Brown, 7 July 1999.

<sup>27</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 269, “Bericht aus unserer Arbeit in Saskatoon, vorgetragen auf der provinziellen Predigerversammlung am 13. und 14. März 1934 in Rosthern, Saskatchewan.”

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1139, File: Former Students in Russia.

<sup>29</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 863, File 34, JJT to B.B. Janz, 9 August 1955.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold Dyck, *Lost in the Steppe*, 332.

<sup>31</sup> James Urry, “John Melville and the Mennonites: A British Evangelist in South Russia, 1837–c. 1875,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54 (October 1980): 305–323.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Walter and Edna Thiessen, 14 April 1999.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Katherine Thiessen Wiens, 18 October 1999.

<sup>34</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 270, JJT “An die innere Missionsbehörde der Allgemeinen Konferenz,” 29 August 1930.

<sup>35</sup> SMHSA, Katie Hooge Collection, J.J. Thiessen, “Kurzer Rückblick auf die letzten 43 Jahre meines Lebens.”

<sup>36</sup> “Heimgegangen: Ält. J.J. Thiessen,” *Der Bote*, 14 September 1977, 7.

<sup>37</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “Kurzer Rückblick.”

**Chapter 3: 1914–1922 Troubled Times**

- <sup>1</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1135, File: Articles (1), “Eine Unterhaltung mit der alten Wanduhr,” n.d.
- <sup>2</sup> James Urry, “Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth and the Mennonite Experience in Imperial Russia,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 3 (1993): 3–29.
- <sup>3</sup> John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 63.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.
- <sup>5</sup> Al Reimer, “Sanitätsdienst and Selbstschutz: Russian-Mennonite Nonresistance in World War I and Its Aftermath,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 3 (1993): 135–148.
- <sup>6</sup> John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, 71.
- <sup>7</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 269, JJT to P.G. Sawatzky, 24 January 1944.
- <sup>8</sup> Lawrence Klippenstein, “Mennonite Pacifism and State Service in Russia: A Case Study in Church-State Relations, 1789–1936” (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1984), 198.
- <sup>9</sup> JJT, “Familiennachrichten: Ältester Jacob H. Janzen, 1878–1950,” *Der Bote*, 1 March 1950, 7.
- <sup>10</sup> Jacob H. Janzen, *Lifting the Veil*, 76–77.
- <sup>11</sup> Lawrence Klippenstein, “Mennonite Pacifism and State Service in Russia,” 182.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.
- <sup>13</sup> CGCA, Frank H. Epp Collection, taped interview of Frank H. Epp with JJT, 13 January 1973.
- <sup>14</sup> John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, 77–78.
- <sup>15</sup> John B. Toews, ed., *The Mennonites in Russia from 1917 to 1930: Selected Documents* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1975), 395. Minutes of the meeting are found in this book.
- <sup>16</sup> According to statistics provided in John B. Toews, *Mennonites in Russia from 1917 to 1930*, 480, seven men under age 30 represented non-mobilized men while 26 represented the mobilized. The total number of persons at the meeting was nearly 200.
- <sup>17</sup> A photo of the Kornelsen sisters is found in Gerhard Lohrenz, *Heritage Remembered: A Pictorial Survey of Mennonites in Prussia and Russia*, rev. ed. (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1977), 163.
- <sup>18</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1135, File: Articles (1).
- <sup>19</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “Ich gedenke meiner Mutter.”
- <sup>20</sup> Katherine M. (Thiessen) Wiens, “My Father, J.J. Thiessen.”
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with Katherine Thiessen Wiens, 1 September 1999.
- <sup>22</sup> Lawrence Klippenstein, “Mennonite Pacifism and State Service in Russia,” 219, notes the soldiers were at times generous in sharing their loot with the destitute, some of whom were Mennonites.
- <sup>23</sup> Jars Balan, “Reflections of the Revolution in Ukraine: Nestor Makhno as Presented to Readers of *Ukrains'kyi holos*, 1918–1921,” in Fred Stambrook, ed., *A Sharing of Diversities: Proceedings of the Jewish Mennonite Ukrainian Conference, “Building Bridges”* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1999), 157–172.
- <sup>24</sup> Lawrence Klippenstein, “Mennonite Pacifism and State Service in Russia,” 223.

- <sup>25</sup> John B. Toews, “The Origins and Activities of the Mennonite *Selbstschutz* in the Ukraine (1918–1919),” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46 (January 1972): 17.
- <sup>26</sup> Tina’s brother-in-law Gerhard Penner, husband of her sister Helena, was a member of the *Selbstschutz*. A nephew, Jacob Kornelsen, also may have been involved. Interview with George Konrad, 5 July 1999.
- <sup>27</sup> John P. Dyck, ed., *Troubles and Triumphs, 1914–1924: Excerpts from the Diary of Peter J. Dyck* (Springstein, 1981), entries for 8 and 25 August 1918.
- <sup>28</sup> Lawrence Klippenstein, “Mennonite Pacifism and State Service in Russia,” 227.
- <sup>29</sup> John B. Toews, “The Origins and Activities of the Mennonite *Selbstschutz*,” 23.
- <sup>30</sup> See Chapter 7 for a similar response from JJT toward the issue of military enlistments in World War II in Canada.
- <sup>31</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 883, File 193, JJT to H. Warkentin, 6 February 1970.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1135, File: Articles (1).
- <sup>33</sup> The sources for this story are: *Memoirs*, 43 ff.; A.K., “Erfahrungen aus der letzten Bolschewisten Zeit,” *Friedensstimme* 17 (7 September 1919): 2–3; Peter Lorenz Neufeld, “Go East, Young Manitoban, Go East,” *Historian* (Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association) 9 (October 1998): 1.
- <sup>34</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1135, File: Articles (1); interview with George Konrad, 5 July 1999.
- <sup>35</sup> For JJT’s account of this event see, “Ich dankte meinen Gott,” *Der Bote*, 3 December 1974, 1–2. “Aus deutschen Ansiedlungen: In unserer Halbstädter Wolost,” *Friedensstimme* 17 (23 November 1919): 7, reported on Thiessen’s beating and hospitalization.
- <sup>36</sup> In a sermon some years later, JJ referred to the “thorns of the flesh” that God sometimes chooses to place in life; their purpose is to keep God’s followers prayerful, humble, mindful of their weakness and dependent on God’s grace. Thiessen Family Collection, Sermon for 21 February 1960, Text: 2 Cor 12: 1–10.
- God’s grace is all we have. Our life, our food, our joys, our success and failure, our thorn in the flesh, our cross—all come through God’s grace alone. None are earned. Through grace we attain eternal life; through grace we are saved. Everything changes and decays, but God’s grace remains eternal.
- <sup>37</sup> *Memoirs*, n.p.
- <sup>38</sup> Interview with A. Roy Brown, 7 July 1999.
- <sup>39</sup> Tina shared this recollection with Hedio later. Interview with Hedio Thiessen Loewen, 11 April 1999.
- <sup>40</sup> *Memoirs*, 42–43; MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1135, File: Articles (1).
- <sup>41</sup> John P. Dyck, *Troubles and Triumphs*, entry for 20 May 1921.
- <sup>42</sup> MLA, II, Folder 33, Russian Relief misc., “Zusammenstellung der General-Memorandum No.1 der Halbstädter Wolost.”
- <sup>43</sup> P.C. Hiebert, *Feeding the Hungry* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Central Committee, 1929), 206.
- <sup>44</sup> In response to the question, “How were the hungry provided for during the winter of 1921–22?” the Tiegenhagen response was, “through support of the village.” MLA, II, Folder 33, Russian Relief misc., “Zusammenstellung.”
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* Interviews with George Konrad, 5 July 1999; Cornelius Toews, 3 July 1999. Heinrich Goerz, *The Molotschna Settlement*, 236.
- <sup>46</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “50 Jahre im Dienste der Nächstenliebe,” *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 11 March 1970, 2–3, 14.



<sup>47</sup> Memoirs, n.p.

<sup>48</sup> P.C. Hiebert, *Feeding the Hungry*, 217–220.

<sup>49</sup> MLA, II, Folder 33, Russian Relief misc., “Erläuternd Tabelle zum Diagramm der Dörfer den Halbstädter Wolost.”

<sup>50</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “Gottes Mitarbeiter,” *Der Bote*, 25 February 1964, 8.

#### Chapter 4: 1922–1926 Emigration

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth examination of the reasons for emigration, see John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland: The Story of the Mennonite Emigration from Soviet Russia, 1921–1927* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1967), 81–90; and John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, 107–119.

<sup>2</sup> John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 84.

<sup>3</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites since the Communist Revolution* (Altona: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1962), 282.

<sup>4</sup> JJT’s recollections of this assignment were published in “Vor vierzig Jahren,” *Der Bote*, 14 July 1964, 10–12; an English translation of this article appeared as, “Russian-Mennonite Exodus to Canada, 1924,” trans. Herbert P. Enns, in *Ontario Mennonite History*, 12 (September 1994), 10–12.

<sup>5</sup> John B. Toews, ed., *The Mennonites in Russia from 1917 to 1930*, 157.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Katherine Thiessen Wiens, 1 September 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with A. Roy Brown, 7 July 1999.

<sup>8</sup> JJT, “Vor vierzig Jahren,” 10. This story is also told in John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 161 ff.

<sup>9</sup> The translation is from John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 164.

<sup>10</sup> JJT, “Vor vierzig Jahren,” 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> JJT relates the story of his meeting with the Masseys in “Begegnung mit dem verstorbenen General-Gouverneur Vincent Massey,” *Der Bote*, 16 January 1968, 1–2.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 895, File 249, Tina u. N.N. Driedger to JJT, 21 May 1963.

<sup>14</sup> CGCA, Frank H. Epp Collection, interview with JJT, 13 January 1973.

<sup>15</sup> According to John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 180, the Tiegenhagen land was sold to Russians. Others suggest that Germans from Volhynia had bought it. See, K. Peters, *Genealogy of Heinrich Kornelsen*.

<sup>16</sup> The dates are somewhat puzzling. The earliest date for Tina and the girls is May 24, 1925; the earliest for JJ is May 25, 1926. It could be that JJ did not take the exam in 1925 as the rest of the family did, or that he failed to pass it at that time. The health certificates are in the possession of the Thiessen family.

<sup>17</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1139, File T, JJT to J.B. Toews, 28 January 1976.

<sup>18</sup> The most detailed account of this escape is recorded in J.B. Toews, *JB: The Autobiography of a Twentieth Century Mennonite Pilgrim* (Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), 40–41.

<sup>19</sup> See T.D. Regehr, *For Everything a Season: A History of the Alexanderkrone Zentralschule* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1988), 73–75 for an overview of the changes in education.

<sup>20</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, Binder 1, H. Dueck & P. Neufeld, Halbstadt Landwirtschafts-Kooperativer Verein, “An die III-te Gruppe der Fischauer Arbeitsschule,” 24 Feb. 1926.

<sup>21</sup> Memoirs, 53.

<sup>22</sup> For a description of the process of obtaining a passport after the dissolution of the *Verband*, see Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 227–228.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with A. Roy Brown, 7 July 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, Binder No. 1, Henry Goertz to JJT, 2 August 1977.

### Chapter 5: 1926–1930 “All beginnings are hard”

<sup>1</sup> B.B. Friesen, “Familiennachrichten: B.B. Wiens,” *Der Bote*, 20 August 1952, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), 176.

<sup>3</sup> H.S. Voth, “Lebenschronik der Mutter Voth,” *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 13 May 1936, 9.

<sup>4</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “Erinnerungen an Erfahrungen aus der Anfangszeit in Kanada,” *Der Bote*, 25 January 1977, 1–2.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel P. Enns’ account of the fire is found in “Feuersbrunst in Rosthern,” *Der Bote*, 22 December 1926, 5–6.

<sup>6</sup> JJT, “Erinnerungen,” 2.

<sup>7</sup> John B. Toews, *With Courage to Spare: The Life of B.B. Janz: 1877–1964* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1978), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, Binder No. 1, JJT to “Dear Colleagues” (teachers in Russia), January 1927.

<sup>9</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 282.

<sup>10</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1389, File 1533, “Minutes . . . February 9th, 1927.”

<sup>11</sup> JJT, “Erinnerungen,” 2.

<sup>12</sup> For information on the immigration of Russian Mennonites after the initial wave in the 1870s, see Jacob E. Peters, “The Forgotten Immigrants: The Coming of the ‘Late Kanadier,’ 1881–1914,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 129–145.

<sup>13</sup> The story of the Hague-Osler reserve is told in *Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve 1895–1995* (Hague-Osler Reserve Book Committee, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Rosthern’s history is recounted in *Old and New Furrows: The Story of Rosthern* (Rosthern: Rosthern Historical Society, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Education with a Plus: The Story of Rosthern Junior College* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1975), 76.

<sup>16</sup> MHCA, ZMIK Collection, Vol. 1155, File 2, Protokoll Nr. 2, 30 December 1926.

<sup>17</sup> For in-depth treatments of the Friesen-Braun trials, see George P. Friesen, *Fangs of Bolshevism OR Friesen—Braun Trials in Saskatoon, 1924–1929* (Saskatoon: George P. Friesen, 1930); and Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 214–217.

<sup>18</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 896, File 255, “Bericht die am 16. Juni 1933 in Hague auf der allgemeinen halbjährlichen Bruderberatung der Rosenorter Mennonitengemeinde gewählte Kommission zur Untersuchung der Isaak Braunschens Anschuldigungen . . .,” n.d.

<sup>19</sup> *Old and New Furrows*, 165.

- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Hedie Thiessen Loewen, 11 April 1999.
- <sup>21</sup> JJT, “Rückblick auf unsere drei Jahre in Rosthern, 1927–1930,” 1977.
- <sup>22</sup> The history of the Academy is told in Frank H. Epp, *Education with a Plus*.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.
- <sup>24</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 269, JJT to P.G. Dyck, 6 September 1929.
- <sup>25</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 228.
- <sup>26</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1389, File 1533, “Minutes . . . October 6th, 1927.”
- <sup>27</sup> James Urry argues that the ZMIK’s founders hoped that the organization would develop a common sense of peoplehood by recreating those features of community life which had existed in Russia. James Urry, “Congregations, Communities and Peoplehood: The New *Russländer* in Canada (1923–1940)” (unpublished paper).
- <sup>28</sup> MHCA, ZMIK Collection, Vols. 1155, 1156, 17 November 1927, indicates that the ZMIK budgeted \$600 annually for technical work, but several other individuals also did this work, therefore the full amount did not go to JJT. Information on JJ’s involvement with ZMIK is taken largely from files in the MHCA, ZMIK Collection.
- <sup>29</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 206.
- <sup>30</sup> MHCA, ZMIK Collection, Vol. 1155, File 5, Dietrich Epp and J.J. Thiessen to Hon. W.L. Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada, 17 January 1930.
- <sup>31</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 269, JJT to P.G. Dyck, 6 September 1929.
- <sup>32</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, JJT to J.J. Mathias, 28 February 1976.
- <sup>33</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 313.
- <sup>34</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 886, File 205, JJT to “Lieber Schwager,” 21 May 1929.
- <sup>35</sup> In the election the Liberals were elected in 28 ridings, the Conservatives in 24, Progressives in 5 and Independents in 6. The Conservatives went on to form a coalition government.
- <sup>36</sup> *Memoirs*, 43; MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 881, File 176, JJT to Herman W. Enns, 6 January 1972.
- <sup>37</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 270, JJT “An die innere Missionsbehörde,” 29 August 1930.
- <sup>38</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “Erinnerungen an meinen ersten Konferenzbesuch in Canada,” *Der Bote*, 2 July 1974, 2.
- <sup>39</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 2365, “M,” 301.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2367, “P,” 89.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with A. Roy Brown, 7 July 1999.
- <sup>42</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1336, File 1029, JJT to Frank H. Epp, 1 November 1961.
- <sup>43</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 270, JJT “An die innere Missionsbehörde,” 29 August 1930.
- <sup>44</sup> MHCA, ZMIK Collection, Vol. 1157, File 3: Krankenkasse & Waisenamt 1927–1936, “Unterstützungen im Jahre 1930.”
- <sup>45</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 896, File 255, JJT to DT, 12 September 1933.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, File 262, JJT to DT, 3 November 1940. In this letter JJ recalls that Margareta Toews provided soup for the family while Tina was ill. This may have been during her hospitalization for TB or for the mastectomy.
- <sup>47</sup> In the course of research, only one letter of JJ’s was found in which he referred to

Tina's cancer; even that one did not identify that it was breast cancer. MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 270, JJT "An die innere Missionsbehörde der Allgemeinen Konferenz," 29 August 1930.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Vol. 886, File 205, JJT to Lieber Bruder Johann, 21 May 1929.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Vol. 897, File 269, JJT to P.G. Dyck, 6 September 1929.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., Vol. 886, File 205, JJT to Liebe Geschwister, 7 August 1929.

## Chapter 6: 1930–1939 Early Ministry in Saskatoon

<sup>1</sup> Don Kerr and Stan Hanson, *Saskatoon: The First Half-Century* (Edmonton: NeWest, 1982), 231, 294.

<sup>2</sup> Marlene Epp, "The Mennonite *Mädchenheim* of Winnipeg: A Home Away from Home," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988): 101.

<sup>3</sup> The most in-depth study of the origins of the Saskatoon ministry is found in Esther Patkau, "J. J. Thiessen's Ministry in Saskatoon." This document is a major source for this account.

<sup>4</sup> Lois Barrett, *The Vision and the Reality: The Story of Home Missions in the General Conference Mennonite Church* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1983), 118.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Peters, "Organizational Change within a Religious Denomination: A Case Study of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1903–1978" (PhD dissertation, University of Waterloo, 1986), 297–298.

<sup>6</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 270, JJT to "Innere Missionsbehörde," 23 October 1930.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Vol. 896, File 253, letter dated 29 January 1931.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., File 252, David Toews to W.S. Gottshall, 25 October 1930.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Vol. 897, File 270, JJT to "Die Innere Missionsbehörde," 5 Jan 1931.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Vol. 896, File 253, David Toews to Rev. W.S. Gottshall, 31 January 1931 and W.S. Gottshall to David Toews, 6 Feb 1931.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Tena Pauls, 29 December 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Hertha Kampen, Lil Epp, Marie Penner, Mary Schroeder and Elfriede Harder, 14 April 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Esther Patkau, "J. J. Thiessen's Ministry in Saskatoon," 51, 53–54.

<sup>14</sup> Conversation with Clara K. Dyck, 12 June 2000.

<sup>15</sup> MHCA, Henry T. Klaassen Collection, Vol. 3751, "Memoirs of Henry T. Klaassen," 33.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Hertha Kampen, et al.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Tena Pauls.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Hertha Kampen, et al.

<sup>19</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 269, "Bericht aus unserer Arbeit in Saskatoon, vorgetragen auf der provinziellen Predigerversammlung am 13. und 14. März 1934 in Rosthern, Saskatchewan."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., JJT to Helene Epp, 19 January 1932.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., "Bericht aus unserer Arbeit in Saskatoon."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Vol. 896, File 259, JJT to DT, 6 September 1937.

<sup>23</sup> This finding is based on a search of JJT's correspondence with the Home Mission Board.

- <sup>24</sup> A large collection of JJ's sermons remains in the possession of his family.
- <sup>25</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 896, File 256, JJT to David Toews, 27 August 1934.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., Vol. 897, File 270, untitled report for the Home Mission Board, 1943.
- <sup>27</sup> Esther Patkau, *First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon 1923–1982* (Saskatoon, 1982), 29.
- <sup>28</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1136, File: "Conf of Menn in Sask 1966–70," JJT to Waldemar Regier, 4 August 1970.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., Vol. 950, File 500, "Report to the Mission Board," 8 January 1952.
- <sup>30</sup> William P. Delainey and William A.S. Sargeant, *Saskatoon: The Growth of a City* (Saskatoon: The Saskatoon Environmental Society, 1974), 50–51.
- <sup>31</sup> Letter from William Janzen, 21 October 1999.
- <sup>32</sup> JJT, "Recollections from the work at Pleasant Hill, 1930" in Esther Patkau, "J. J. Thiessen's Ministry in Saskatoon," 151. These recollections are the source of information and quotations in this section on Pleasant Hill.
- <sup>33</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, file 270, "Bericht aus der Arbeit in Saskatoon für die Behörde der Innern Mission," 1939; JJT to "Die Behörde der Innern Mission," 3 October 1933.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., Vol. 896, File 260, JJT to DT, 12 December 1938.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., Vol. 897, File 266, JJT to "Werte Missionsfreunde," 14 March 1944.
- <sup>36</sup> JJT, "Recollections from the work at Pleasant Hill," 156–157.
- <sup>37</sup> In a report to the Home Mission Board in 1946, he wrote about the young people as follows: "It is our desire to persuade each one to assume a responsibility in joining and working in one of the following organizations: Sunday School, Christian Endeavour, Girls' Home, Young Peoples fellowship meetings and socials, Boys' Club, Willing Helpers, Junior Choir, Church Choir." MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 269, "To the Home Mission Board, 26 February 1946."
- <sup>38</sup> So many individuals shared personal stories of this nature that it is impossible to reference them.
- <sup>39</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 896, File 259, Dr. H.E. Alexander to Bishop Teeves (sic), 27 May 1937; DT to Dr. H.E. Alexander, 28 May 1937.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., Vol. 897, File 271, "Report to the Home Mission Board," September 1944.
- <sup>41</sup> Esther Patkau, "J. J. Thiessen's Ministry in Saskatoon," 77.
- <sup>42</sup> Interview with Katherine Thiessen Wiens, 7 October 1998.
- <sup>43</sup> These views were expressed in the sermon which JJ preached at the ordination of Peter A. Reimer as deacon of the church in 1952. MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 952, File 518, "Ordination am 29. Juni 1952."
- <sup>44</sup> Hedio Loewen, "Recollections," in Esther Patkau, *First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon*, 48–49.
- <sup>45</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 952, File 518, "Ordination am 29. Juni 1952."
- <sup>46</sup> Interview with Hedio Thiessen Loewen, 11 April 1999.
- <sup>47</sup> H. Siemens, "Saskatoon," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 29 April 1931, 5.
- <sup>48</sup> Letters by P.D. Willms and D. Pätkau, "Eine Ergänzung zu 'Saskatoon, Sask.' von H. Siemens," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 13 May 1931, 5.
- <sup>49</sup> The records of the Saskatoon Mennonite Brethren Church are housed at the Centre for

Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg, CMBS, BF-526 (Central MB Church, Saskatoon). The first minutes available are dated 13 December 1931. There is no mention of when the group began to meet for worship.

<sup>50</sup> H. Siemens, "Saskatoon," 5; and Tina and Jac. J. Giesbrecht, "Korrespondenzen: Saskatoon, Sask.," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 6 May 1931, 9.

<sup>51</sup> In 1940, JJ wrote to David Toews that he had received an invitation to speak at the MB *Jugendverein*. MHCA, JTT Collection, Vol. 896, File 262, JTT to DT, 29 April 1940.

<sup>52</sup> The new building for First Mennonite was dedicated on 18 October 1936 (JTT, "Einladung," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 14 October 1936, 7) and the Mennonite Brethren Church building was dedicated on 8 November 1936 (H.S. Rempel, "Bekanntmachung: Saskatoon, Sask.," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 4 November 1936, 7).

<sup>53</sup> MHCA, JTT Collection, Vol. 1136, File "Conf of Menn in Sask 1966–70," JTT to Waldemar Regier, 4 August 1970.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 897, File 270, "Bericht an die Behörde der Innern Mission über die Arbeit in Saskatoon für das erste Halbjahr 1932."

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, "Bericht aus unsrer Arbeit in Saskatoon, Sask., Canada, in der Gemeinde, im *Mädchenheim* und auf der Missionsstation auf dem Westende der Stadt, P. Hill" (1936).

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Anna Willms, 15 April 1999. According to Mrs. Willms, her husband, Peter D. Willms, was one of the few members of the church that held onto his job with the CPR for the duration of the Depression.

<sup>57</sup> MHCA, JTT Collection, Vol. 897, File 270, JTT, "Bericht an die Behörde der Innern Mission über unsere Arbeit im Zweiten Halbjahr des Jahres 1932 in Saskatoon," 4 January 1933.

<sup>58</sup> *Official Minutes and Reports of the Twenty-Sixth Session of the General Conference, 1933* (held in Bluffton, Ohio, August 23–30, 1933), 28.

<sup>59</sup> MHCA, JTT Collection, Vol. 896, File 254, JTT to David Toews, 29 September 1932.

<sup>60</sup> Esther Patkau, "J. J. Thiessen's Ministry in Saskatoon," 70.

<sup>61</sup> These letters are found primarily in MHCA, JTT Collection, Vols. 896 and 897.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 896, File 256, JTT to DT, 31 July 1934.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1136, File E, JTT to Niel Enns, 13 August 1976.

<sup>64</sup> Esther Patkau, "J. J. Thiessen's Ministry in Saskatoon," 70.

<sup>65</sup> MHCA, JTT Collection, Vol. 897, File 270, "Erntedank- und Missionsfest, October 1939."

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, "Bericht aus Saskatoon über die Arbeit in der Gemeinde, im *Mädchenheim* und auf der Missionsstation Pleasant Hill an die Behörde der Innern Mission," 1937.

<sup>67</sup> MHCA, JTT Collection, Vol. 896, File 259, JTT to DT, 29 September 1937.

<sup>68</sup> Correspondence and minutes regarding the planning of the conference are found in *Ibid.*, File 260.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Arnold Regier, 7 June 1999. The choir director was Helen Buhr Regier.

<sup>70</sup> Joh. G. Rempel, "Späne von der Konferenz," *Der Bote*, 24 August 1938, 1–2.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Katherine Thiessen Wiens, 1 September 1999.

**Chapter 7: 1939–1946 The War Years**

- <sup>1</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 896, File 261, JJT to David Toews, 7 September 1939.
- <sup>2</sup> Esther Patkau, “J.J. Thiessen’s Ministry in Saskatoon,” 85–88.
- <sup>3</sup> *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 25 April 1939, 3.
- <sup>4</sup> *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 6 May 1939, 12.
- <sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Professor T.D. Regehr, University of Calgary, for this information.
- <sup>6</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 950, File 502, A.A. Schellenberg to JJT, 29 March 1936.
- <sup>7</sup> Translation by Esther Patkau, “J.J. Thiessen’s Ministry in Saskatoon,” 86–87.
- <sup>8</sup> JJT described his meeting with Schellenberg in MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 896, File 261, JJT to David Toews, 14 September 1939. This letter is the source of information for this encounter.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Esther Patkau, “J.J. Thiessen’s Ministry in Saskatoon,” 87.
- <sup>11</sup> This was reported in “Saskatoon, den 13. Januar,” *Der Bote*, 17 January 1940, 4.
- <sup>12</sup> T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 39. Information for this section, including a more in-depth discussion of procedures around obtaining CO status, is found in *ibid.*, 35–39.
- <sup>13</sup> Henry J. Gerbrandt, *Adventure in Faith: The Background in Europe and the Development in Canada of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba* (Altona: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1970), 319–320.
- <sup>14</sup> T.D. Regehr, “Lost Sons: The Canadian Mennonite Soldiers of World War II,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46 (October 1992): 473.
- <sup>15</sup> Marlene Epp, “Heroes or Yellow-bellies? Masculinity and the Conscientious Objector,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (1999): 107–117.
- <sup>16</sup> T.D. Regehr, “Lost Sons,” 474–475.
- <sup>17</sup> When David Toews reported on Janz’s actions, JJ responded, “What a sad situation! How could Brother Janz go so contrary to the decision of the whole delegation?” MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 896, File 262, JJT to David Toews, 29 November 1940.
- <sup>18</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, Vol. 888, File 176, JJT to Mr. Ernest Enns, 10 July 1944.
- <sup>19</sup> In at least one case a young man—Robert Makaroff, a Doukhobor medical student—was allowed to return to university as a CO after having spent some time in a forestry camp. See Stan Hanson and Don Kerr, “Pacifism, Dissent and the University of Saskatchewan, 1938–1944,” *Saskatchewan History* 45 (Fall 1993): 3–14.
- <sup>20</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 264, JJT to David Toews, 17 April 1942 and 12 May 1942.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 883, File 188, Cornelius Reimer to JJT, 28 July 1944.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 882, File 181, Cornelius Reimer, et al., to The Right Honourable W.L. Mackenzie King, 17 November 1942.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 897, File 270, “An die Behörde der Innern Mission,” 15 January 1943.
- <sup>24</sup> See for example, *ibid.*, Vol. 882, File 179, JJT to Archie Heinrichs, 28 February 1944.
- <sup>25</sup> Interview with A. Roy Brown, 7 July 1999.
- <sup>26</sup> MHCA, I.G. Neufeld Collection, Vol. 2898, File 3, JJT to I.G. Neufeld, 26 February 1943.

- <sup>27</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 271, Helen Kasdorf to Mr. Thiessen, 14 April 1943; a second undated letter in German also appears in this file. JJ's letters to Helena have not been preserved, yet her letters acknowledge and thank him for his.
- <sup>28</sup> Interviews with Louise Kasdorf Sawatsky; Sally Kasdorf, 15 April 1999.
- <sup>29</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 881, File 173, Letter to Peter David Boldt, 3 September 1943.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with T.D. Regehr, 19 October 1999.
- <sup>31</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 265, JJT to David Toews, 25 March 1943.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Hedio Thiessen Loewen, 11 April 1999.
- <sup>33</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 270, "Jahresbericht" (1939–1940).
- <sup>34</sup> A copy of this version of the Constitution is found in *ibid.*, Vol. 950, File 500.
- <sup>35</sup> See Gloria Neufeld Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996) for an analysis of the role and contribution of Mennonite women's societies in Canada.
- <sup>36</sup> Esther Epp, "The Origins of Mennonite Central Committee (Canada)" (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1980), 62.
- <sup>37</sup> *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 2 February 1940.
- <sup>38</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1392, File 1546, MCRC Financial Ledger, 1940–1944.
- <sup>39</sup> This story was told to William Janzen of Ottawa, Ontario, by his father. Letter from William Janzen, 4 October 1999.
- <sup>40</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 333.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with Jake Wiens, 10 May 2000.
- <sup>42</sup> Ted Regehr, "The Influence of World War II on the Conference of Mennonites in Canada" (Unpublished paper, CMC History Conference, 1997).
- <sup>43</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1322, File 930, "Bericht über die Sitzung von Vertretern der Mennonitengemeinden im westlichen Canada, abgehalten in der Kirche der Schoenwieser Mennonitengemeinde zu Winnipeg am 28. Mai 1941."
- <sup>44</sup> *Jahrbuch der Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada 1946*, 25.
- <sup>45</sup> Gail McConnell, *Saskatoon: Hub City of the West* (Saskatoon: Windsor Publications, 1983), 57.
- <sup>46</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 265, David Toews to JJT, 4 March 1943.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 882, File 184, JJT to A.J. Neuenschwander, Board of Home Missions, 27 June 1945.
- <sup>48</sup> J.J. and Katherine Thiessen, "Das mennonitische Mädchenheim in Saskatoon," *Warte-Jahrbuch für die Mennonitische Gemeinschaft in Canada 1943* (Steinbach: Arnold Dyck, 1943), 62.
- <sup>49</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 271, "Report to the Home Mission Board," September 1944.
- <sup>50</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, "'Der Weihnachtsmann' to 'Liebe Katherine,'" 24 December 1941.
- <sup>51</sup> D.E., "Silberhochzeit in Saskatoon," *Der Bote*, 23 September 1942, 4.
- <sup>52</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 265, JJT to David Toews, 25 March 1943.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 882, File 179, JJT to A. Harder, 7 March 1944.



### Chapter 8: 1946–1955 International Involvements

- <sup>1</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 928, File 417, JJT to J.A. Peters, 24 October 1945.
- <sup>2</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “Ansprache gehalten am 8. März in Saskatoon . . . über die restlose Tilgung der Reiseschuld,” *Der Bote*, 4 April 1945, 1.
- <sup>3</sup> The CPR cancelled all interest that accrued after 1930. Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 344.
- <sup>4</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 885, File 198, Jacob A. Neufeld to JJT, 8.9.1945.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 897, File 269, JJT to David Toews, 7 November 1932.
- <sup>6</sup> Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 256.
- <sup>7</sup> For an examination of J.J. Thiessen’s intervention on behalf of unwed mothers (victims of rape) and women refugees generally, see Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with Henry Poettcker, 17 March 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> See Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 391–427, and T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada 1939–1970*, 79–100 for an overview of the post-World War II immigration of Mennonites.
- <sup>10</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1332, File 1001, H.S. Bender to JJT, 5 April 1948.
- <sup>11</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 401, 408, 421.
- <sup>12</sup> The CPR credit line was used to pay for the transportation of 703 of the 777 Danzig and Prussian Mennonites. T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada 1939–1970*, 93.
- <sup>13</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1394, File 1557, “Bericht des Vorsitzenden der Board of Colonization für die erweiterte Boardsitzung am 1. März 1951.”
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1395, File 1562, “Protokoll der erweiterten Jahressitzung des Zentralen Menn. Hilfs-Komitees in der Kirche der M.B. zu Saskatoon, am 20. Februar 1953.”
- <sup>15</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 861, File 21, Kaethe Hooge to Helen Kornelsen, 7 June 1949.
- <sup>16</sup> The documents and correspondence related to the immigration of relatives is found in MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 886, File 203.
- <sup>17</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1363, File 1294, JJT to Mr. A.L. Jolliffe, 12 November 1948; and other correspondence with immigration officials 1950–1951.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1394, File 1557, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Colonization, held at the Board Office on February 7, 1950, at 9:30 a.m.”
- <sup>19</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 439.
- <sup>20</sup> Samuel Floyd Pannabecker, *Open Doors: The History of the General Conference Mennonite Church* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1975), 286–287.
- <sup>21</sup> James C. Juhnke, *A People of Mission: A History of General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1979); and Theron Schlabach, *Gospel Versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863–1944* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980).
- <sup>22</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, “Ansprache über Äussere Mission. Gehalten auf dem Missionsfest in Calgary am 25. Sept. 1955.”
- <sup>23</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, “Speech delivered to the Naomi Mission Society on November 21, 1962.”
- <sup>24</sup> MHCA, Mennonites in Manitoba Collection, Vol. 2217, File 21: P.P. Willms correspondence to JJT.

- <sup>25</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, Sermon collection, “Stadtmission,” c. 1935.
- <sup>26</sup> James C. Juhnke, *A People of Mission*, 105.
- <sup>27</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 928, File 419, JJT to H.T. Klaassen, 3 August 1951.
- <sup>28</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, “Paper read at the meeting of the Women’s Mission Society of Grace Mennonite Church in Regina, on September 6, 1967.”
- <sup>29</sup> *The Minister’s Manual* (Newton: General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America, Board of Publication, 1950), 96.
- <sup>30</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 905, File 308, “Appendix I, Report of the Candidate Committee to the Board of Missions, August 17, 1955.”
- <sup>31</sup> Esther Patkau, “Women’s Ministries in CMC 1947–1997” (CMC History Conference, 1997).
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Esther Patkau, 15 April 1999.
- <sup>33</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 866, File 61, JJT to George Groening, 31 January 1958.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 872, File 112, JJT to Home Mission Board, 16 August 1950.
- <sup>35</sup> Esther Epp, “The Origins of Mennonite Central Committee (Canada),” 128.
- <sup>36</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1394, File 1557, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Colonization, together with Provincial Representatives held in First Mennonite Church, Saskatoon, Sask., April 8th and 9th, 1947.”
- <sup>37</sup> Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897–1962* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1998), 524.
- <sup>38</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 890, File 223, J. Gerbrandt to Orie O. Miller, MCC, 3 June 1948.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 928, File 418, “Protokoll einer Sitzung in Saskatoon auf der J.J. Thiessen, G.G. Epp u. H.T. Klaassen anwesen waren . . . am 26. Nov. 1949.”
- <sup>40</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, JJT Diary of South America trip, entry for 5 September 1950.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Katherine Thiessen Diary of South America trip, entry for 17 October 1950.
- <sup>42</sup> Marlene Epp, *Women without Men*, 100.
- <sup>43</sup> Katherine Thiessen Diary of South America trip, entry for August 21–22, 1950.
- <sup>44</sup> D. Boschman, “Briefe aus Südamerika: Ältester J.J. Thiessen in Paraguay,” *Der Bote*, 1 November 1950, 9.
- <sup>45</sup> JJT Diary of South America trip, entry for 14 October 1950.
- <sup>46</sup> John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933–1945* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1999); and Peter P. Klassen, *Die Deutsch-Völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco, Paraguay, 1933–1945* (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1990).
- <sup>47</sup> The term *völkische* is the adjective form of *Volk*, which refers to a nation, people or state. In the context of National Socialism, however, the words *völkische* or *Volk* came to have a mystical meaning and related to the bond shared by all people of German ethnicity and blood, no matter where they lived. *Völkische* movements or parties were ones closely aligned with the National Socialist cause. See John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?*, 26–27.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 166–168.
- <sup>49</sup> Willard H. Smith, *Paraguayan Interlude: Observations and Impressions* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1950), 58.
- <sup>50</sup> JJT, “Zum 10. Todestag von Dr. Fritz Kliewer,” *Bibel und Pflug*, 16 June 1966, 2.
- <sup>51</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 872, File 112, David Koop to JJT, 1 March 1950.

<sup>52</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1370, File 1375, J.W. Fretz, “A Special Confidential Summary Report to the MCC Executive Committee on Observations and Recommendations to the MCC in its South American Program, November 2, 1951.” See also JJT Collection, Vol. 875, File 141, J.W. Nickel to JJT, 22 January 1950.

<sup>53</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 894, File 242, JJT, “Report on Trip to South America.”

<sup>54</sup> AMC, MCC Collection, Minutes of Executive Committee, 2 and 27 December 1950.

<sup>55</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1312, File 872, JJT to C.F. Klassen, 19 January 1951 and 20 March 1951.

<sup>56</sup> Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender*, 475–476.

<sup>57</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1391, File 1540, Wm T. Snyder to C.A. DeFehr, 17 May 1950 and Wm T. Snyder to B.B. Janz, 14 June 1950.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1371, File 1383, JJT to B.B. Janz and C.A. DeFehr, 9 September 1953.

<sup>59</sup> Henry H. Winter, *A Shepherd of the Oppressed: Heinrich Winter, Last Ältester of Chortitza* (Wheatley: By the author, 1990), 126.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from T.D. Regehr to the author, 29 August 2000; MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 872, File 112, P.C. Hiebert to JJT and H.A. Fast, 12 July 1950.

<sup>61</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, JJT Diary of South America Trip, entry for 29 July 1950.

<sup>62</sup> Conversation with T.D. Regehr, 26 June 2000.

<sup>63</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 872, File 112, JJT to P.C. Hiebert, 22 July 1950.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 894, File 242, JJT, “Report on Trip to South America.”

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Henry Poettcker, 17 March 1999.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 871, File 102, “Jacob John Thiessen.”

## Chapter 9: 1946–1955 Canadian Conference Involvements

<sup>1</sup> *Jahrbuch der Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada 1948*, 42–47.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Frank H. Epp, “The Struggle for Recognition,” in Henry Poettcker and Rudy A. Regehr, *Call to Faithfulness: Essays in Canadian Mennonite Studies* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1972), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Peters, “Changing Leadership Patterns: Conference of Mennonites in Canada,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 7 (1989):168–169.

<sup>4</sup> T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970*, 25–26.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Peters, “Organizational Change within a Religious Denomination: A Case Study of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1903–1978” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Waterloo, 1986), 268.

<sup>6</sup> T.D. Regehr, “The Influence of World War II on Mennonites in Canada,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): 74.

<sup>7</sup> T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Poettcker, “Policy Changes and Developments in CMC Leadership Patterns (1952–1997)” (Unpublished paper, CMC History Conference, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Adolf Ens, “Setting the Stage: Fifty Years of Conference of Mennonites in Canada” (Unpublished paper, CMC History Conference, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 866, File 59A, JJT to Dr. and Mrs. H.A. Fast, 13 August 1973.

- <sup>11</sup> Quoted in T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970*, 262–263.
- <sup>12</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 915, File 352, P.S. Goertz to JJT, 21 August 1946.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Bruno Dyck, “Half a Century of Canadian Mennonite Bible College: A Brief Organizational History,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 11 (1993): 197.
- <sup>14</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 921, File 380, JJT to J.G. Rempel and Paul Schroeder, 7 March 1946.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 915, File 353, J.J. Janzen to J.J. Thiessen, 18 March 1947. Janzen was the treasurer of the Glenbush congregation.
- <sup>16</sup> CGCA, Frank H. Epp collection, taped interview of FHE and JJT, 13 January 1973; MHCA, Gerhard Lohrenz Collection, Vol. 3312, JJT to G. Lohrenz, 1966.
- <sup>17</sup> J.B. Toews, *JB*, 135.
- <sup>18</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 881, File 176, J. H. Enns to JJT, 12 February 1945.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 917, File 359, JJT to members of College Board, 19 April 1949.
- <sup>20</sup> Thiessen Family Collection. Binder 2, “Hitherto the Lord has helped us:” Message delivered at the CMBC Graduation Service, 30 April 1972.
- <sup>21</sup> Gerhard Ens, “*Die Schule Muss Sein: A History of the Mennonite Collegiate Institute* (Gretna: Mennonite Collegiate Institute, 1990), 172.
- <sup>22</sup> Theron F. Schlabach, *Gospel versus Gospel*, 114.
- <sup>23</sup> “Bericht über das Bible College der Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada” in *Jahrbuch der Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada 1948*, 116–117
- <sup>24</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 916, File 356, JJT to W.H. Enns, 28 August 1948.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 917, File 359, “Auszug aus dem Protokoll,” n.d. This document reproduced a resolution re CMBC from a meeting of the Blumenorter Bruderschaft on 20 September 1950.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 926, File 411, “Minutes of Board Meeting of the Canadian Mennonite Bible College February 10th, 1950.”
- <sup>27</sup> See for example, *ibid.*, Vol. 917, File 359, Arnold Regier to JJT, 5 March 1949.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, File 361, P.J. Schaefer to JJT, 27 February, 7 March and 26 March 1950.
- <sup>29</sup> I.I. Friesen was one faculty member who felt this way. He wrote to JJ, “Our ideal cannot be just to adhere to the status quo in a rapidly changing world. I believe that our youth must come first and if the time has come that we cannot reach them in the German language we must frankly admit this. To lose a generation of young people just because we do not wish to admit realities is too great a price to pay.” *Ibid.*, File 360, I.I. Friesen to JJT, 1 March 1950.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with David and Mildred Schroeder, 1 March 1999.
- <sup>31</sup> Conversation with Esther Patkau, 26 June 2000.
- <sup>32</sup> For the most recent examinations of this controversy, see T. D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970*, 178–183; and Anna Ens, *In Search of Unity: Story of the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1996), 80–84. For J.H. Enns’ reflections on the controversy, see “*Denk Wer Du Bist: Stories of the Johann Hermann and Agathe Enns Families* (By the family, 1998), 68–74.
- <sup>33</sup> Anna Ens, *In Search of Unity*, 81
- <sup>34</sup> J.G. R[empel], “Sollte Gott gesagt haben?": In Angelegenheit des Aelt. J.H. Enns, Wpg.,” *Der Bote*, 19 September 1945, 3.
- <sup>35</sup> J. Schulz to J.P. Klassen, 26 June 1946. I am grateful to Ernest Enns for sharing this letter with me.

<sup>36</sup> This view is espoused by T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970*, 182–183.

<sup>37</sup> This view is put forth by Anna Ens, *In Search of Unity*, 84.

<sup>38</sup> This is essentially the view put forth by the Enns family in “*Denk Wer Du Bist*,” 89. Jacob H. Janzen, observing events from a distance (Ontario), made the following comment in a letter to JJ, “Those from Winnipeg are complaining about those from Saskatoon-Rosthern, and the latter about the former. The point at issue is maliciousness.”

<sup>39</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 888, File 213, JJT to Rev. Benj. Ewert, 14 January 1946.

<sup>40</sup> MHCA, John H. Enns Collection, Vol. 4575, File 1, J.H. Enns to J.H. Janzen, 17 October 1945.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, File 20, David Toews to J.H. Enns, 11 October 1945.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, P.D. Willms to J.H. Enns, 25 April 1945.

<sup>43</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 888, File 212, W. Enns to J.G. Rempel, 22 November 1945.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, File 213, “The Winnipeg Controversy.” This document really records the notes of a CMC executive meeting held 18 April 1948, at which time the invitation of the GC committee was considered.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, File 212, “Bericht der Manitoba Versammlung vom 16ten März, 1949, Bethel Missionskirche, Winnipeg.”

<sup>46</sup> W.F. Unruh of the Church Unity Committee indicated that, in recording the minutes, he had “selected those things which he felt would contribute most to clearing Brother J.H. Enns and help to establish confidence.” *Ibid.*, File 213, W.F. Unruh to Rev. Arnold Funk, et al., 6 April 1949.

<sup>47</sup> MHCA, John H. Enns Collection, Vol. 4575, File 2, W.F. Unruh to Arnold Funk, et al., 6 April 1949. A copy of this letter also went to J.H. Enns in which there was appended a blind P.S. as follows: “Two of the brethren did not rise when the vote was taken and they may still talk. I think when they read this report they will have to be quiet. I have written as frankly and fully as I have to avoid further questionings and gossipings.”

<sup>48</sup> T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970*, 182.

<sup>49</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 888, File 213, J.H. Enns to JJT, 22 March 1952.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, JJT to J.H. Enns, 7 April 1952.

<sup>51</sup> *Bless the Lord, O My Soul: 1949–1999, Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church 50th Anniversary* (Winnipeg: Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church, 1999), 92.

<sup>52</sup> T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970*, 306–309.

<sup>53</sup> Johann David Funk, “They Tell Each Other, They Are Still Who They Were: The Struggle for Self-Definition in Minority Cultures: The Case of the General Conference Mennonites in British Columbia” (Unpublished MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1993), 84–85.

<sup>54</sup> JJ responded by reminding his colleague that salvation was by faith rather than one’s apparel. Interview with Katherine Thiessen Wiens, 1 September 1999.

<sup>55</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 902, File 297, “Report to the Board of Missions on Northern Trip, June 27 to July 9, 1952,” by John Thiessen, General Secretary.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 928, H.T. Klaassen to JJT, 25 August 1951.

<sup>57</sup> Esther Patkau, *First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon*, 224.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 59; and Esther Patkau, “J.J. Thiessen’s Ministry in Saskatoon,” 94–98.

- <sup>59</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, “Story Related by Elmer Richert at a ‘Bote’ meeting—November 1973.”
- <sup>60</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 888, File 211, [65 names] to J.J. Thiessen and J. Rempel, 27 September 1945.
- <sup>61</sup> MHCA, Mennonites in Manitoba Collection, Vol. 2217, File 21, P.D. Willms to P.P. Willms, 30 November 1945.
- <sup>62</sup> Betty and Dick Epp, eds. *A Memoir: My Life's Journey by Abram J. Berg, 1903–1997* (Saskatoon: By the authors, 1998); interview with Betty and Dick Epp, 13 April 1999.
- <sup>63</sup> For a detailed examination of this controversy, see Frank H. Epp, *Education with a Plus*, 173–212.
- <sup>64</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 891, File 226, JJT to Dietrich Zacharias, 23 March 1950.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, JJT to H.T. Klaassen, 11 April 1950.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, P.D. Willms to H.T. Klassen (sic), 21 February 1950. Willms' comments to JJ were appended in a special P.S. to this letter.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, JJT to Dietrich Zacharias, 23 March 1950.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, JJT to H.T. Klaassen, 18 April 1950.
- <sup>69</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, Sermon for 16 July 1950, Text: Genesis 13:5–12.
- <sup>70</sup> First Mennonite Church Collection, “Protokoll #79 der Bruderberatung der Ersten Mennonitengemeinde, 9. Mai 1951.” Anna Willms confirmed that a reconciliation took place between JJT and her husband, P.D. Willms. Interview with Anna Willms, 15 April 1999.
- <sup>71</sup> Interview with Walter Thiessen, 14 April 1999.
- <sup>72</sup> Interview with Katherine Thiessen Wiens, 1 September 1999.
- <sup>73</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 882, File 183, JJT to Mr. and Mrs. John Moonen, 1 November 1955.

#### Chapter 10: 1955–1964 Winds of Change

- <sup>1</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 897, File 271, JJT, “Jubiläumsfeier des *Mädchenheim*.”
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 951, File 509, “Bericht der Ersten Mennonitengemeinde zu Saskatoon, abgehalten am 7. Februar 1955.” Special note to D.A. Lepp, dated 9 February 1955.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> JJ made the changes and got approval for them from the Trustees later on. First Mennonite Church Collection, Minutes of Trustees Meeting, 20 September 1957.
- <sup>5</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 886, File 205, JJT to Lieber Bruder Abram, 20 September 1961.
- <sup>6</sup> First Mennonite Church Collection, “Protokoll der Bruderberatung, . . . 31 Dezember 1939, 29 Februar 1947, 23 November 1949.”
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, “Report given by J.K. Wiens to Brotherhood on February 6, 1963.”
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 951, File 509, “Bericht der Ersten Mennonitengemeinde zu Saskatoon, Sask., abgehalten am 7. Februar 1955.”
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with Sally Kasdorf and Viola Schmidt, 14 April 1999.
- <sup>10</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 931, File 437, JJT to members of executive of CMC, 9 September 1958.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 953, File 521, “Agenda for Brotherhood Meeting on Febr. 3, 1960.”

- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., Vol. 951, File 509, “Bericht der Ersten Mennonitengemeinde zu Saskatoon, abgehalten am 7. February 1955.”
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., Vol. 864, File 42, JJT to P.A. Wedel, 30 November 1957. See also First Mennonite Collection, Brotherhood Meeting of December 9, 1957.
- <sup>14</sup> This was discussed at the meeting immediately following Baergen’s outburst. Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Jake Wiens, 21 April 1999.
- <sup>16</sup> JJ intimated that financial considerations were a factor. Florence Driedger interview with JJT, 28 June 1976. I am grateful to Ms. Driedger for access to the taped interview.
- <sup>17</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 950, File 501, “Words of Farewell to Rev. & Mrs. N.W. Dick, August 20, 1961.”
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., Vol. 867, File 70, JJT to William Klassen, 12 November 1957.
- <sup>19</sup> When Dr. Ernest Baergen put this question to JJ in the 1960s, JJ was not at all happy. Conversation with Ernest Baergen, 16 April 1999.
- <sup>20</sup> For two overviews of the shifts in ministerial leadership that took place in the 1950s or 1960s, see Rodney Sawatsky, “Autonomy and Accountability: Church Polity within the Conference of Mennonites in Canada,” in Helmut Harder, *Accountability in the Church: A Study Guide for Congregations* (Winnipeg: CMC, 1985); and Everett J. Thomas, ed., *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership: A Statement by the Joint Committee on Ministerial Leadership* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1996).
- <sup>21</sup> MHCA, H.T. Klaassen Collection, XX–29, Vol. 3751, “Memoirs,” 47. I am grateful to the Klaassen family for permission to use these memoirs.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 48.
- <sup>23</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 867, File 72, JJT to H.P. Lepp, 8 April 1957.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., Vol. 920, File 376, “Auszug aus dem Protokoll der Ältestenversammlung am 8. April, 1957, in Winkler, Manitoba.”
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., Vol. 864, File 42, JJT to John Thiessen, Mission Board, 29 July 1958.
- <sup>26</sup> *Jahrbuch der Konferenz der Mennoniten in Kanada 1959*, 4–5.
- <sup>27</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 867, File 72, JJT to H.P. Lepp, 8 April 1957.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Henry and Susan Gerbrandt, 28 September 1999; conversation with H.P. Epp, 28 May 2000.
- <sup>29</sup> MHCA, J.M. Pauls Collection, Vol. 3790, File 2, JJT to J.M. Pauls, 10 September 1959. According to Henry Gerbrandt, there was another letter in which JJ accused Pauls of being used by younger men to push him out, but that letter has not come to light. Interview with Henry and Susan Gerbrandt, 28 September 1999.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.; interview with Henry H. Epp, 26 July 2000.
- <sup>31</sup> MHCA, H.T. Klaassen Collection, “Memoirs,” 46.
- <sup>32</sup> “Ministers Wrestle with Major Internal Problems,” *The Canadian Mennonite*, 10 August 1962, 11.
- <sup>33</sup> See Gerald W. Schlabach, “Patterns of Church Life: The Case for Conference Authority—Part 1,” *The Mennonite* 15 (September 1998), 8–9.
- <sup>34</sup> Anna Ens, *In Search of Unity*, 119–124.
- <sup>35</sup> Interviews with David Schroeder, 18 May 1999; J. F. Pauls, 23 March 2000.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview with Waldemar Janzen, 22 February 1999.
- <sup>37</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 926, File 411, “Protokoll der Jahressitzung der Bibelcollegebehörde vom 14.–17. Jan. 1957 im College-Gebäude in Tuxedo, Manitoba.”

- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., Vol. 920, File 376, “Auszug aus dem Protokoll der Ältestenversammlung am 8. April, 1957, in Winkler, Manitoba.” David Schulz was not present at this meeting due to illness but was in agreement with the decision taken.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., Vol. 926, File 411, “Protokoll der Jahressitzung der Behörde des Canadian Mennonite Bible College, am 13. und 14. January 1958.”
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., Vol. 920, File 367, Franz H. Epp to JTT, 30 November 1957.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., Leo Driedger to JTT, 3 April 1958.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., Aaron Klassen to the College Board, 25 January 1957 (sic). The letter was clearly written in 1958, but misdated.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., File 376, JTT to Paul Schaefer, 26 March 1958.
- <sup>44</sup> Interview with David Janzen, 28 April 2000.
- <sup>45</sup> Interview with Waldemar Janzen, 22 February 1999.
- <sup>46</sup> Bruno Dyck, “A Multiple Rationalities Model of Transformational Change: Understanding the Ubiquity of Change” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Alberta, 1991), 160–163.
- <sup>47</sup> Bruno Dyck, “Half a Century of Canadian Mennonite Bible College: A Brief Organizational History,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 11 (1993): 198, 203–206.
- <sup>48</sup> Interviews with Waldemar Janzen, 22 February 1999; David Schroeder, 19 April 2000; Henry Poettcker, 17 March 1999.
- <sup>49</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1394, File 1556, “Bericht der Board of Colonization . . . an die Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada zu Didsbury, Alta., und an die Konferenz der Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde zu Coaldale, Alta.” (Juli 1955).
- <sup>50</sup> MHCA, JTT Collection, Vol. 886, File 205, JTT to Frau Jacob Sukkau, 1 February 1956.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., Abram Thiessen to JTT, 25 February 1957.
- <sup>52</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, “Mennonite Central Committee Minutes, MCC Executive Committee, 24 March 1956.” Notes taken by Elmer Ediger of this meeting are especially informative.
- <sup>53</sup> Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender*, 483–484.
- <sup>54</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1394, File 1556, JTT to Mr. P.T. Baldwin, chief, Admissions Division, Department of Immigration, 27 October 1955.
- <sup>55</sup> Interview with J.M. Klassen, 16 May 2000.
- <sup>56</sup> The story of the development of MCC Canada is explored in Esther Epp, “The Origins of Mennonite Central Committee (Canada).” It forms the basis for this account.
- <sup>57</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1394, File 1556, “Bericht an die Konferenzen zu Abbotsford und Hepburn im Juli 1959.”
- <sup>58</sup> Esther Epp, “The Origins of Mennonite Central Committee (Canada),” 175.
- <sup>59</sup> Interview with J.M. Klassen, 16 May 2000.
- <sup>60</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1398, File 1589, “Minutes of the Meeting of the CMRIC Liquidation Committee, held . . . in Winnipeg on March 20, 1968.”
- <sup>61</sup> Gerhard Ens, “Der Bote 1924–1995,” *Der Bote: Sonderausgabe* (English edition), 15 November 1995, 24–25.
- <sup>62</sup> MHCA, JTT Collection, Vol. 908, File 317, JTT to Elmer Ediger, 16 September 1955.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., JTT to Dr. C. Krahn, 6 April 1954; 19 April 1955.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., Paul R. Shelly to Cornelius Krahn, 12 April 1955; A.I. Loewen to JTT, 19 April 1955; and P.J. Froese to JTT, n.d.



<sup>65</sup> See Frank Henry Epp, “An Analysis of Germanism and National Socialism in the Immigrant Newspaper of a Canadian Minority Group, the Mennonites, in the 1930s” (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1965), 229–235; and Jonathan F. Wagner, *Brothers beyond the Sea: National Socialism in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981), 49–50.

<sup>66</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 869, File 86, W. Quiring to JJT, 5 March 1949.

<sup>67</sup> Walter Quiring to B.B. Janz, 19 February 1953, as quoted in John D. Thiessen, *Mennonite and Nazi*, 226.

<sup>68</sup> In 1951, when Quiring was planning a trip to South America, Cornelius Krahn wrote, “Dr. Quiring who once shared with some of our South American Mennonites great hopes regarding the mission of Hitler will now be in a good position to explain to these people why these hopes were shattered. Along these lines he will be able to help our people in some constructive and sound thinking.” JJ received a copy of this letter. MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 869, File 86, Cornelius Krahn to John Thiessen, 10 November 1951.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., Vol. 908, File 317, “Memo on an unofficial meeting to discuss temporary arrangements for editorship of *Der Bote* . . . April 5, 1955, Rosthern, Sask.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., File 318, Willard Claassen to JJT, 25 May 1956. A similar letter went from Cornelius Krahn to Walter Quiring, 26 October 1956.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Justina Heese, 27 April 2000.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with David Schroeder, 19 April 2000.

<sup>73</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 909, File 323, Walter Quiring to Willard Claassen, 18 June 1962.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., JJT to W. Quiring, 18 April 1962.

<sup>75</sup> Frank H. Epp, “Editorial: Explanations as Excuses,” *The Canadian Mennonite*, 23 March 1962, 2. See also MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1336, File 1031, “Some Comments Regarding the Chapter ‘The Immigrants and Citizenship’” by Frank H. Epp, 23 May 1962.

<sup>76</sup> Walter Quiring, “Von unserem Arbeitstisch,” *Der Bote*, 13 March 1962, 4.

<sup>77</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 909, File 323, Walter Quiring to Willard Claassen, 18 June 1962.

<sup>78</sup> Draft of an article by Peter Rempel on the *Mennonite Exodus* controversy. I am grateful to Peter Rempel for sharing this with me.

<sup>79</sup> MHCA, B of Col Collection, Vol. 1336, File 1031, Frank H. Epp to JJT, 9 June 1962.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., Epp wrote, “Brother Thiessen, I must admit that this is becoming a little bit of a difficult experience for me. I have asked for criticism and have received a lot of it. I have tried to be grateful for this, knowing that it was all meant to be constructive and that the manuscript could only be improved thereby. Official pressures and threats, however, are another matter.”

<sup>81</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 909, File 323, JJT to Walter Quiring, 28 June 1962.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example: *Der Bote*, 19 February, 22 October and 29 October 1963; *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 25 January 1963; *Saskatchewan History* 16 (August 1963): 115–116.

<sup>83</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 910, File 324, Cornelius Krahn to JJT, 4 March 1963.

<sup>84</sup> At one point Klaassen informed the General Conference that, if Quiring were not replaced by the end of 1963, he would no longer serve on the board. Ibid., Vol. 909, File 323, H.T. Klaassen to Willard Claassen, 20 November 1962.

<sup>85</sup> This comment was made by Gerhard Ens who succeeded Wiens in 1977. *Der Bote*, 15 November 1995.

<sup>86</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 902, File 298, JJT to John Thiessen, 24 August 1960.

<sup>87</sup> Ältester Wilhelm Enns of Springstein at times felt that JJ was not clear enough. Interview with Edward Enns, 22 June 1999.

<sup>88</sup> This comment is attributed to Frank Bueckert in MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 881, File 175, Bill Driedger to JJT, 12 November 1949.

### Chapter 11: 1964–1977 Passing the Torch

<sup>1</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 886, File 205, JJT to “Liebe Schwester, Bruder, Neffen und Nichten,” 16 September 1963.

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

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Edward Enns, 8 December 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Käthe Hooge, “Aeltestenordination in S'toon,” *Der Bote*, 21 January 1964, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Enns, “A Tribute to J.J. Thiessen Who Walked with Me.”

<sup>6</sup> Esther Patkau, *First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon*, 82.

<sup>7</sup> Conversation with Robert Krahn, 15 May 2000.

<sup>8</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 882, File 181, JJT to Mrs. D.J. Klassen, 15 May 1972.

<sup>9</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, Jasch and Tina to Margaret Ruppel, 28 February 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Henry Poettcker, 17 March 1999.

<sup>11</sup> JJT, “Was tut man, wenn man im Ruhestand ist?” *Der Bote*, 17 April 1973, 1–2.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Lynne Derksen Braun and Kathy Derksen Pankratz, 15 May 2000.

<sup>13</sup> First Mennonite Church Collection, Minutes of Church Council Meeting, January 10, 1964. Provisions included payment of \$86 to Tina until the time of her death, should JJ predecease her.

<sup>14</sup> JJT, “So reisten wir zur Konferenz in Estes Park,” *Der Bote*, 6 August 1968, 1–2.

<sup>15</sup> A copy of the manifesto is found in MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 882, File 179. It was circulated to JJ and other CMC ministers in March 1969 by a minister from British Columbia.

<sup>16</sup> Larry Kehler, “Diversity of opinion recognized at Saskatoon conference sessions,” *The Canadian Mennonite*, 18 July 1969, 1–2.

<sup>17</sup> See Henry J. Gerbrandt, *En Route, Hinjawäajis: The Memoirs of Henry J. Gerbrandt* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1994), 225–226.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Waldemar Janzen, 18 May 2000.

<sup>19</sup> “Photo essay,” *1969 CMBC Yearbook*, [2].

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Henry Poettcker, 18 May 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Rudy Friesen, 9 January 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Henry Poettcker, 18 May 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Abe Bergen, 17 May 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Walter and Edna Thiessen, 14 April 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Lynne Derksen Braun and Kathy Derksen Pankratz, 15 May 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, J.J. and K. Thiessen to Beverly Wiens, 6 March 1976.

<sup>27</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 884, File 197, JJ and Katherine Thiessen to Henry and Mary Warkentin, 25 June 1970.

- <sup>28</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, JJT to “Liebe Schwestern Susa und Anna,” 10 February 1976.
- <sup>29</sup> Helene u. C.T. Thiessen, “Nach 53 Jahren ein Wiedersehen,” *Steinbach Post*, 6 July 1965, 1.
- <sup>30</sup> “Preface,” in Henry Poettcker and Rudy A. Regehr, eds., *Call to Faithfulness*, n.p.
- <sup>31</sup> CGCA, Frank H. Epp collection, Epp interview with JJT, 13 January 1973.
- <sup>32</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1135, File: Correspondence with Church Members, JJT to Jacob Gerbrandt, 20 June 1977.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 891, File 226, JJT to Frank H. Epp, 18 April 1970.
- <sup>34</sup> Conversation with Jake Harms, 28 May 2000.
- <sup>35</sup> Interview with David Janzen, 18 April 2000.
- <sup>36</sup> In the note JJ referred to the breakdown in his relationship with Quiring and stated, “As much as the fault is mine, I ask for your forgiveness.” MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 869, File 87, n.d.
- <sup>37</sup> Interview with Arnold Regier, 7 June 1999.
- <sup>38</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1135, File: Correspondence with Church Members, JJT to Mr. and Mrs. Wally Dyck, 9 June 1977.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 883, File 189, JJT to Mr. and Mrs. A.A. Shelly, 29 June 1964.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1136, File: C.A. DeFehr, JJT to C.A. DeFehr, 16 May 1977.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 882, File 181, JJT to D.D. Klassen, 28 February 1973.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 881, File 173, Letter to Len and Mary Borne, 28 Oct 1975.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1136, File: Frank Epp, JJT to Dr. F.H. Epp, 3 December 1976.
- <sup>44</sup> Interview with Lynne Derksen Braun and Kathy Derksen Pankratz, 15 May 2000.
- <sup>45</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, “Tante Tina und Onkel Jasch” to Henry Kornelsen, 14 July 1977.
- <sup>46</sup> Conversation with Jake Harms, 28 May 2000.
- <sup>47</sup> Thiessen Family Collection, “Onkel Jasch und Tante Tina Thiessen” to Mr. and Mrs. G. Thiessen, 2 August 1977.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, “Onkel Jasch und Tante Tina” to Mr. Leo Thiessen, 9 June 1977.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, Jacob and Katherine Thiessen to Mr. Abram Voth, 18 August 1977.
- <sup>50</sup> MHCA, JJT Collection, Vol. 1137, File: I–J, JJT to Lydia Janzen, 18 August 1977.
- <sup>51</sup> It was not clear among family members whether a stroke caused JJ to fall, or whether he tripped, fell and then suffered the hemorrhage as a result of hitting his head on the concrete steps.
- <sup>52</sup> Interview with Walter and Edna Thiessen, 14 April 1999.

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**Archival Collections***Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives (MHCA), Winnipeg, Manitoba**J.J. Thiessen Collection.* This vast collection includes personal correspondence, as well as correspondence, minutes, reports and other materials related to JTT's involvements at First Mennonite Church, Saskatoon; General Conference Home Mission Board; General Conference Foreign Mission Board; Conference of Mennonites in Canada; Canadian Mennonite Bible College; Mennonite Central Committee; Mennonite Central Committee Canada*Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization Collection.* Correspondence, minutes, reports and financial records. Includes records of the Mennonite



*Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization Collection.* Correspondence, minutes, reports, financial records. Includes records of the Mennonite Central Relief Committee and Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council.

*H.T. Klaassen Collection.* Memoirs

*I.G. Neufeld Collection.* Correspondence

*Gerhard Lohrenz Collection.* Correspondence

*J.M. Pauls Collection.* Correspondence pertaining to Conference of Mennonites in Canada

*Johann H. Enns Collection.* Correspondence and minutes pertaining to the "Winnipeg Controversy," 1945–1949

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*Katie Hooge Collection.* Personal correspondence as well as some materials related to her work with JJT

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Tape-recorded interview with J.J. Thiessen by Florence Driedger, 28 June 1976. This tape recording is in the possession of Ms. Driedger.

Tape-recorded interview with J.J. Thiessen by Frank H. Epp, 13 January 1973. This tape recording is part of the Frank H. Epp collection at the Conrad Grebel College Archives, Waterloo, Ontario.

Thiessen Family Collection. Included in this collection are: correspondence, sermons, two binders of gathered materials, trip diaries, photographs, guestbooks, scrapbooks and other memorabilia. I am deeply grateful to the family for making these materials available.

Thiessen, J.J. "Gottes Führungen in meinem Leben." This collection constitutes JJT's memoirs. Some items were published in *Der Bote* as brief articles, but most were not. A photocopy is in the author's files at MHCA

### Interviews

Bergen, Abe – 17 May 2000  
 Braun, Lynne Derksen and Kathy Derksen Pankratz – 15 May 2000  
 Brown, A. Roy – 7 July 1999  
 Boldt, Dave and Anne – 26 July 2000  
 Derksen, Helen – 13 April 1999  
 Driedger, Florence – 6 May 2000  
 Driedger, Leo – 8 March 1999  
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 Enns, Ed – 8 December 1998; 22 June 1999  
 Enns, Ernest – 24 August 2000  
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Baergen, Ernest – 16 April 1999  
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## Abbreviations

Board	Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization
CHPC	Conference of Historic Peace Churches
CMBC	Canadian Mennonite Bible College
CMC	Conference of Mennonites in Canada
CMRC	Canadian Mennonite Relief Committee
CMRIC	Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council
GC	General Conference
GCMC	General Conference Mennonite Church
HPCCC	Historic Peace Church Council of Canada
MB	Mennonite Brethren
MBBC	Mennonite Brethren Bible College
MCC	Mennonite Central Committee
MCCC	Mennonite Central Committee (Canada)
MCRC	Mennonite Central Relief Committee
MWC	Mennonite World Conference
NRRO	Non-Resistant Relief Organization
RJC	Rosthern Junior College
ZMIK	<i>Zentral Mennonitishes Immigrantenkomitee</i> (Central Mennonite Immigrant Committee)

**Esther Epp-Tiessen** was born in 1955 in Altona, Manitoba. She studied at Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg and graduated from the University of Manitoba. Her MA thesis in history was on the “Origins of Mennonite Central Committee Canada.” Her book *Altona: Story of a Prairie Town* (1982) received the Margaret McWilliams award of the Manitoba Historical Society.



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