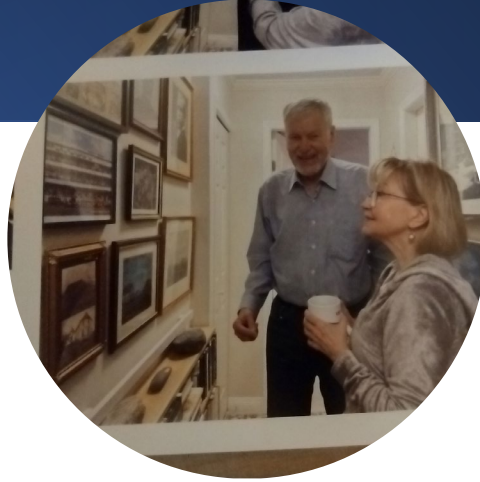




Nataliya Venger

The Mennonites` “Return” to Ukraine: Dialogue with
Lost and Regained Motherland

Acknowledgements

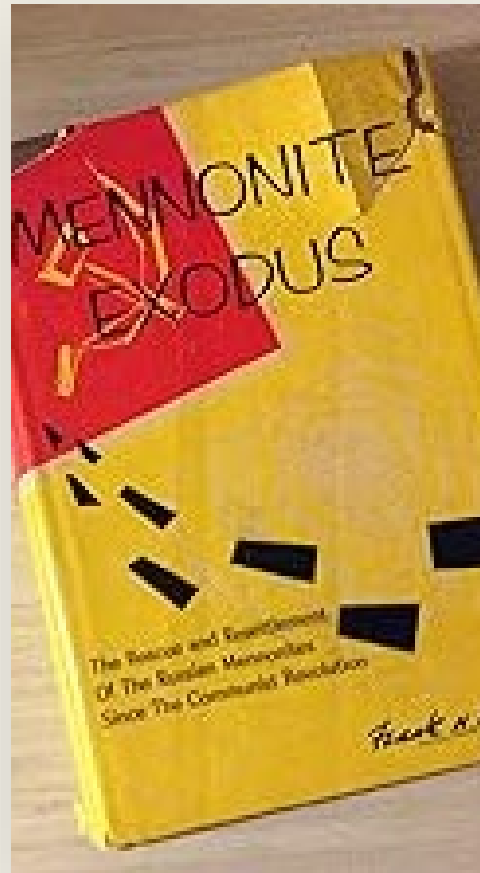
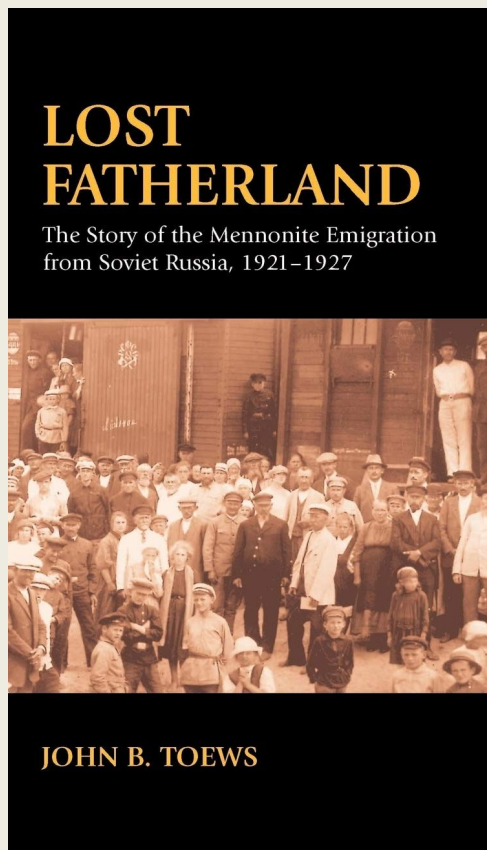


Special thanks to

Marina Unger, Conrad Stoesz, Louie and Nanci Sawatzky, Aileen Friesen, Henk and Ruth Dick, Harold Janz, Edith and Rudy Friesen, John Martens, Olga Shmakina, Fred Wall, Abraham and Kathy Bergen, Werner Toews, Dmitro Meshkov, Art De-Fehr, Peter Letkeman, Leonard Friesen, Len Loeppky.

“When we have left and are crossing the border we will turn to our beloved Russia, remove our caps and heartily thank them for all the good things we and our fathers enjoyed in this land. We will wish Russia all the best for the future and... leave”

B. B. Janz, (May, 2023)

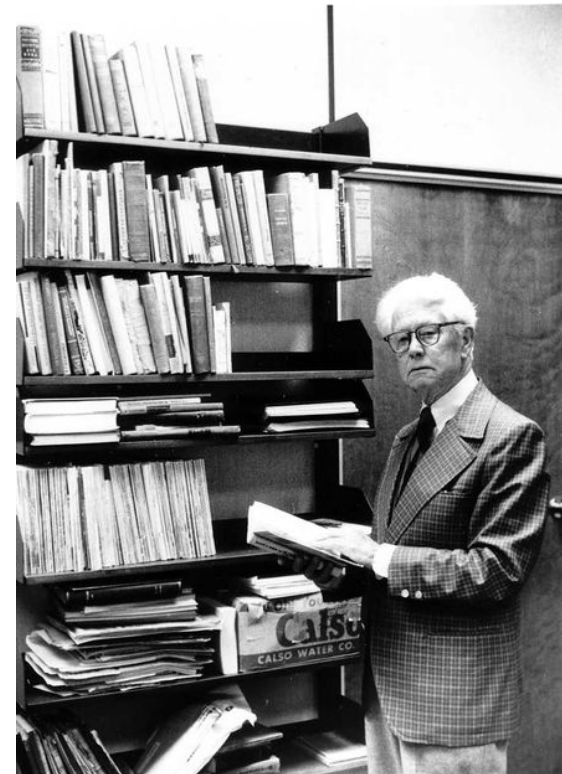


Thanks to famous Mennonite historians Cornelius Krahn, David Rempel, and Gerhard Lohrenz, the Russian (as they said) Mennonite history was present in the intellectual life of the diaspora, exciting interests to the past in 1930s – 1960s and later.

Krahn, Cornelius (1902-1990)



Rempel, David Gerhard (1899-1992)



Their collections from MHA (Winnipeg) tell us about first tours to USSR and Ukraine : historians, writers, educators... Travelers!

“Mennonite Travel Service” conducted its first group tour to the Soviet Union in 1967 (11 groups, 275 people).

“Assiniboine Travel Service LTD” (J. Schroeder, F. Wall, P. Letkeman, R. Voht and others) --- 1970 – 1996.

Reimer, Elmer Edgar Ernest "Al" (1927-2015)

Lohrenz, Gerhard (1899-1986)



Al Reimer: “Every tour produces monuments of poignant drama as blood relatives, for the first time in half a century embrace tearfully in place like Leningrad, Moskow, Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia... The emotional intensity of these bitter-sweet occasions is impossible to describe”



Tours` Mandatory Agenda: soviet museum, collective farm, pioneer camp (for children)

- Peter J. Raimer (after visiting museum): "We were immersed in revolutionary history. The Mennonite period was ignored and barely mentioned."
- Al Raimer: "We were literally overwhelmed by the flow of information on Soviet history, and many of us were dissatisfied because the museum visit was a mandatory activity."

"However, we already know that as tourists in this country, we are operating under a barter system - the Soviet authorities allow us to explore some Mennonite history, provided we are also willing to participate in other sightseeing activities they have planned for us"



Some voices



Gerold Jantzen (about collective farm machinery): "Not much better than what our parents had."

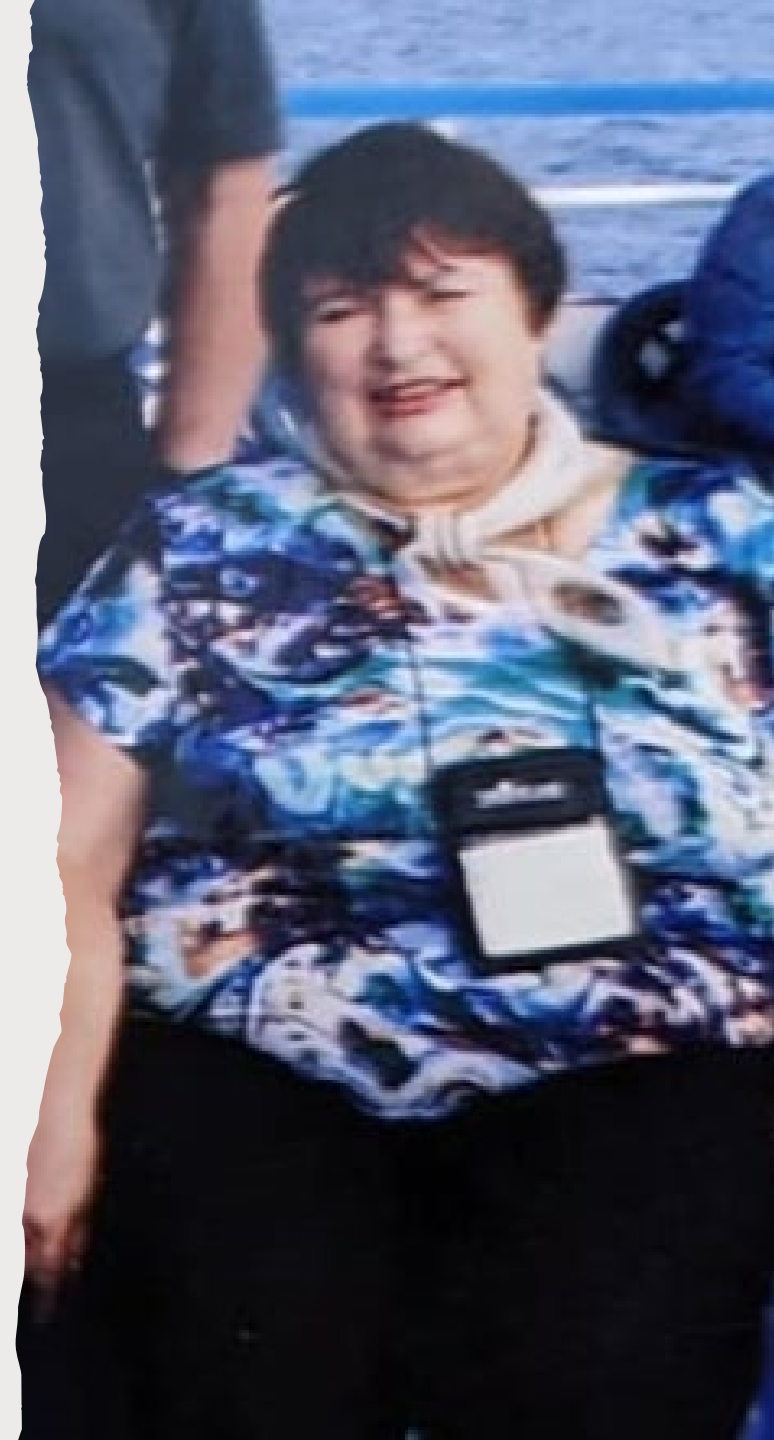


Al Raimer (after visiting former hospital in the village of Waldheim): "The hospital is in poor condition, with primitive equipment and a depressing atmosphere. In the dental office, the chair was like one in a hair salon. I saw a bowl with extracted teeth and blood. I think many years ago, Mennonites had better equipment"

DISCOVERIES

Jacob Heppner memorial

- 1971 tour with G. Lawrence and Larisa Goryacheva (a guide from "Intourist")
- Successfully transported to Canada in 1973. It took its rightful place in the Steinbach Museum.



The Locals

Herman Unger (branch manager from Mennotravel Service): «From my personal travel experience in Russia, I can frankly say that I found the stay most pleasant, very educational and comfortable. I found the people hospitable, the food excellent, and with some exceptions the normal life much like ours».

Peter Reimer noted: "Russians take pride in their achievements. Despite lagging many Western countries, they express absolute confidence that they will catch up with the Western world. This remarkable optimism is amazing. They don't complain, but we often do."



HEALING NOSTALGIA



Harold Jantz: «I felt no sense of nostalgia or bitterness at what might have been as we drove away from the day. No longing for a return. And yet there was a sense of inward pain. No one can put a lock on what he holds and say, “This is mine”. We began to sing...».

Al Reimer: «Nothing I see in the Mennonite Ukraine (!) so powerfully symbolize for me the ruined hopes of our people in this land than this wrecked house of God [church] that was so elegant and proud looking in its prime. The lovely stone gateway arches and delicate iron fence are gone... As the bus pulls away , I know that the memory of this neglected Mennonite monument and the feeling it has aroused will stay with me always».

Be careful! KGB!

G. Lawrence's instructions to the tourists:

- 1) Travel light. Take only what is necessary, nothing more. Only items that you can wash at the hotel (no laundry!).
- 2) Take soap and a basin stopper.
- 3) Do not bring letters with you; relatives should send them by mail.
- 4) Your suitcases are inspected at the entrance for books. You can take one Bible or songbook, but not more and not a new edition. Otherwise, you may be treated with suspicion.
- 5) You can take small souvenirs for guides and relatives: a ballpoint pen, suspenders, a handkerchief. If customs officials take something at the entrance, you should ask for a receipt, and they will return it based on that receipt (!).



Mennonite Heritage Cruises (1995 – 2010, 2018)

Mennonite Heritage Cruises organized by Marina and Walter Unger – a new and more profound concept of nostalgic tourism. It was something that teetered on the edge between imaginary and reality, inviting tourists to become part of a "floating pilgrims' community."

My take: "It's a community of people who long to be Mennonites once again".



Cruises Leaders

- Al Reimer (absent)
- Marina Unger
- Paul Toews (historian)
- Rudy Friesen (architect)
- Alan Peters (genealogist)
- Stephany Martens (musician)



Mennonite Churches in Ukraine

Restored church in Kutuzovka (Petersgagen)
village



- 1995 - the first small parish was formed in Zaporizhzhia.
- 2018 - 8 Mennonite churches functioned in the country (7 Mennonite pastors and 6 Sunday schools for children).

Brave Try

- 1989 – a mission of entrepreneurs ("Mennonite Economic Development Associates" (MEDA)) visited Soviet Union (Arthur de Fer, Milo Stantz, Arthur Block, Neil Janzen, Johannes Reimer, Harry Giesbrecht).
- - Chortitza anniversary + Memorandum

Charity

The Mennonite Family Centre is located on the first floor on the first entry, on the end of the building (Zaporizhzhia).



- MEDA (since 1990s). Horticulture Business Development Project (in 2014 – 2022) to support small business.
- Mennonite Centre in Molochansk (since 1997) (medical and educational projects + much more!).
- “Florence of Zaporizhzhia” (program with Zaporizhzhia University, psychological support).
- Family Centre (since 2002) (two nursing homes; “Kangaroo”, “Prometheus” projects for children with special needs).



Harvey Dick: mobilization of the Ukrainian historians



“No matter how terrible the past was, its oblivion can predetermine even more terrible future”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

- Scholarly conferences 1999 (Chortitza - 99), 2004 (“The Mennonites and Their Neighbors”).
- Exhibitions 1999, 2004
- Library project for Ukrainian scholars
- Grant program to support the dissertation theses on Mennonite History
- Commemoration projects



Memorial Projects: Eichenfeld and Ebenfeld



Paul Epp (volunteer designer) about Eichenfeld monument



“This is the first monument that I designed for Ukraine. It is situated at a mass grave site where all of the inhabitants of the village of Eichenfeld were buried, after they had be killed during a one night massacre...

Because of the suddenness and unexpectedness of their death, and the absence of survivors, they were denied the dignity of a proper burial. My guiding image for this monument is that of a coffin set out for viewing, resting on short supports, tilted upwards at the head-end. It becomes the ‘viewing’ that these people should have had”.

In the former Ebenfeld
village
(by Paul Epp)



“This Mennonite memorial also commemorates the site of a mass grave and the massacre of an entire village. The symbolism is that of a mill wheel. The view will have to walk around the stone to read the inscription, with a bowed head”

Molochansk (2004)



“The town of Molochansk was the administrative centre of the area known as the Molotschna, where most of the Dutch Mennonites lived while in Russia (Ukraine). These Mennonites accomplished many things, both administratively and culturally. This monument recognizes their achievements. The symbolism is that of a threshing stone (acknowledging their agrarian focus), here placed upright on a plinth”.

Paul Epp about the monument called “Missing people”:

“It is located in a park in the section of Zaporizhzhia known as Chortiza... During the 1930s, the Mennonites who remained in this part of the world were purged. The men, typically, were shot, and the women and children dispersed to far eastern parts of the Soviet Union. This monument has as its guiding image that of a mantle piece, with family pictures on it. In this case though, only the profiles remain. The people have been ‘disappeared’. This was the case for those unfortunate people who did not have a chance to be properly remembered.”





Necropolis: evacuation and restoration. Personal and Community's projects.

- "Memorial of the Mennonites of Chortytza" project (W. Toews, B.Wiebe) (since 2019) (Left, right pictures)
- Marie Shroeder's gravestone exhibited in the CMU Gallery (successfully evacuated by the heirs in 1990s) (middle).

DECOMUNISATION

From Anthem of Molochansk:

“Here Cossack chaikas

Traversed the vastness of the Milky river.

The Mennonites founded you –

You became known as Halbstadt forever!”



New streets` name:

Zaporizhzhia (Shoenwiese street, Niebuhrska, Andreas Wallman, Gerhard Rempel street , Mennonite street, Rozental streets),

Dnipro (Chortytzka, Ivan Izau street)

Berdiansk (Mennonite Street).

Conclusions

Paul Toews:

“The Ukrainians and the Mennonites from different countries are collaborating together nowadays. They work in effective partnership with humanitarian agencies, churches and church associations, universities and archives, agricultural cooperatives and small businesses. The Mennonites can again inspire people who have suffered for a long time and for whom the despair was endless. They make easier life of old and feeble people, provide medical care to those who are in need, carry on various social practices, create conditions for social justice, support new research to understand our shared history”

Under this extermination was conditions, Mennonites are still present in Ukraine. They serve as examples to Ukrainian society of a conscientious approach to both the past and the present.

Mennonite congregations remain dedicated to Ukraine in times of prosperity and adversity.