

The Early Mennonite Brethren and Conversion

John B. Toews, *Regent College, University of British Columbia*

Conversion has always occupied a central position in the theology of the Mennonite Brethren. The dissenters of the 1860s, it is generally believed, were distinguished by their strong advocacy of the new birth in a Mennonite society given to nominalism and routinized religion. Belonging to the Brethren during the first four decades of their existence meant a precise definition of conversion (*Bekehrung*), at least in popular opinion. Surprisingly, very little is known about their early view of this experience in terms of both theological content and actual process. P.M. Friesen's massive effort in collecting and publishing early Brethren sources provides an adequate portrait of personalities and events, but relatively little information on the "inner story." As a result, virtually nothing is known about the spiritual journey of the founders or the sermons they preached and the Bible studies in which they participated during the 1860s and 1870s. Perhaps a commonly understood theology of conversion existed in Brethren circles just as there was an assumed theology of church policy and practice. P.M. Friesen's generation possibly felt that they still understood what the founders had said and thought and so left no detailed conversion accounts of the founders or even of the subsequent generation.

There is fortunately one major source which allows us access to the heart and mind of the later nineteenth century Brethren. During the 1890s the editor of the Mennonite Brethren periodical *Zions-Bote*, John F. Harms, rendered posterity an

invaluable service by inviting his readership, male and female, to relate their conversions. The resulting accounts provide over 150 personal recollections, including Jakob Bekker¹ and Abraham Peters,² both signatories to the secession document of 1860. Chronologically they range from the early 1850s to the 1890s and so not only cover the formative period of the church but its early maturation in the Russian and North American context. Happily the accounts are also reflective of gender. 65 of the 156 published conversion accounts (1890-1900) are female.³ In addition to the *Zions-Bote* documents, available autobiographies reflecting later nineteenth century Brethren spiritual quests have also been utilized.

All the documents are characterized by an inherent honesty and forthrightness. Though emerging from a narrow socio-religious setting and reflecting the prevailing village conventions and tensions, they exhibit a refreshing sense of the authentic and individualistic. The informants, in recounting their varied religious journeys, frequently generate a new and unique Christian vocabulary or infuse the old terminology with new meanings. With the passage of time this language of experience becomes somewhat conventionalized, yet remains a faithful reflection of what the early Brethren thought important. Any attempt to define their concept of conversion must ascertain the meaning of this experiential terminology. Throughout this study an attempt will be made to determine the theological meanings of the German words used to describe conversion itself, as well as words with para-meanings and nuances referring specifically to socio-religious situations in the local setting.

The majority of these documents were penned by second generation Brethren adherents whose conversions often occurred in the context of the community established by the original revival. Some of them knew the founding members, others learned of their sentiments from the churches they joined. Many of these congregations were little more than expanded house churches. There is no reason to suspect that the existing piety had significantly changed from the founding generation. In such a setting collective leadership and group exegesis ensured a uniform understanding of Scripture and avoided the individualistic tendencies which so marred the early years of the movement. Itinerant ministers, elected at annual conferences since 1872, regularly visited every congregation however small or remote. The local community was therefore steadily reinforced by the visits of duly authorized and respected leaders who affirmed the corporate understanding of the essentials of faith. It was an improbable scenario. The radical dissenters of the 1860s quickly established a conservative tradition little given to change and novelty. Rapid institutionalization ensured that the second generation of Brethren adherents did not alter the earlier understanding of conversion, though they may have standardized the vocabulary used to describe the process.

The authors of these varied conversion accounts found themselves in a world of conventional Mennonitism in which church and community were tightly fused. In such a setting they purposefully disregarded what was considered tried and true in order to walk an uncharted minority pathway, often in the face of ridicule and opposition by their former co-religionists. Little wonder that some of the accounts

contain elements of the defensive and the reactionary. The severe official reaction of both the Mennonite church and state against Brethren dissent in the 1860s, so amply documented by P.M. Friesen, not only preceeded that decade but continued long afterward. The later nineteenth century conversion accounts confirm the sharp and often long-standing tensions which conversion was thought to have generated within the collective community, the church, the family, and even between husband and wife. The term *die Frommen* (the pious ones) was already used to designate the participants in the quietistic revival in Neu-Kronsweide, Chortitza, in the early 1850s.⁴ Amazingly, its popular use continued until the dawn of the twentieth century.

The tensions were naturally as varied as local circumstances. A young female student in Neu-Kronsweide feared her parents would remove her from school when it became known that the teacher Johann Neufeld was about to be rebaptized. The reason for her fear: "Mother was very antagonistic to *die Frommen*."⁵ Emilie Siemens reported that "anyone who joined the Brethren became the object of community contempt."⁶ Johann Heide observed that in his early search for salvation he felt "*die Frommen* to be no better than myself."⁷ A Rueckenau convert who witnessed the Brethren purchase of a local pub for a house of worship in 1874, experienced parental opposition when she attended their services, for "at that time the Brethren were small in number and despised."⁸ One woman, fearing community censure, hid her husband's boots to prevent him from attending a Brethren meeting.⁹ Another refused to let her husband pray in the home because "she was afraid that I might join the Brethren."¹⁰ When Abraham Bergen wanted to attend Brethren services in the local school his wife did not want to accompany him "for *die Frommen*, according to popular sentiment, were very bad people."¹¹ An anonymous convert recalled how his village was devoid of all spiritual vitality in the 1870s—"we knew nothing of conversion, only that *die Frommen* were very bad people."¹² A Johann Loewen received a visitation from concerned people in the community "who feared I might go over to the Brethren."¹³

The Brethren secession document of 1860 lamented the apostacy of the Old Church and called for a decisive break with that institution. It was not the first time that a call for reform had been heard by Mennonites living on the Ukrainian steppes. A small group of dissenters led by Klaas Reimer (1770-1837) already seceded in 1812 and formed the so-called *Kleine Gemeinde*. The early documents of the group are literally awash with biblical quotations and allow some insight into the inner heart-throb of the movement. The new group demanded a circumspect lifestyle and called for a decisive discipleship which took issue with the obvious sins of the community and which was lived in the context of the local congregation (*Gemeinde*). *Kleine Gemeinde* leaders felt that spiritual parameters were best retained by careful attention to the writings of the Anabaptist Mennonite forebears.¹⁴

It is difficult to delineate the exact nature of the salvation theology espoused by the *Kleine Gemeinde*. Both the first elder Klaas Reimer¹⁵ and his successor, Abraham Friesen (1789-1849), cited deep awareness of sin in the early stages of their religious awakening. Friesen related how he was baptized into the Old Church

without a change of life, then began to search the Scriptures and to read *The Martyrs Mirror*, Menno Simons, George Hansen's *Confession of Faith* and Jacob Denner's sermons. He recalled a dream in which he climbed a steep mountain, driven on by the realization that he could not go down because of the steep cliffs over which he had climbed. "It always seems to me that one must work for salvation with smaller earnestness."¹⁶ While the documents allow for a penitential agony they do not suggest a highly subjective conversion experience climaxing in a salvation assurance and accompanied by a sense of well-being and peace. Instead conversion was not only a commitment to individual discipleship but to the life of the separate people of God. When Heinrich Balzer (?-1846) left the Ohrloff church in 1833 to join the *Kleine Gemeinde* he wrote a farewell poem consisting of 50 verses in which he cited the prevailing shortcomings of the Old Church. He lamented the prevailing covetousness, dishonesty, greed and deception, and also referred to the use of tobacco and alcohol, the practice of worldly manners and the singing of worldly songs as well as the reading of novels. The true church (*Gemeinde*) could not tolerate such sins.¹⁷ In his subsequent letters he continued to emphasize the need to separate from the world and a worldly church and the importance in engaging in the practice of church discipline.¹⁸ Conversion meant a turning to God, but also an ongoing vigilance and struggle against evil, a life in community with the accompanying submission to its direction and authority.

Kleine Gemeinde leaders were doubtlessly right about the spiritual degeneracy of Russian Mennonitism, but they were not alone in their concern. In addition to the *Kleine Gemeinde* records the knowledge of the Old Church salvation theology can be somewhat augmented by three surviving ministerial diaries. They are those of Dietrich Gaeddert (1860-1876),¹⁹ David Epp (1837-1843) and his son Jacob (1851-1880).²⁰ While Gaeddert's jottings reflect the social and religious context of the era, he is not given to much self-disclosure. The same is not true of the Epp diaries. Both father and son were deeply committed Christians, anxious about the state of their personal pilgrimage and concerned about the community they served.²¹ Their openness and candor provide one of the few authentic insights available into the state of the Russian Mennonite soul in the mid-nineteenth century.

Collectively their diary entries, which frequently record personal struggles or mention sermon themes, appear to reflect the fundamentals of historic Anabaptism: the centrality of Christ; a consciousness of sin and a concern with repentance; the importance of faith, and the necessity of consistent living. Father and son reflect somewhat varied aspects of the Russian Mennonite religious pilgrimage. David is far more concerned with the lifestyle of the community and the church's ability to reflect God's Kingdom. In a world in which all belonged to the church the struggle for the good and the right seemed unending. Encountering only the transgressions and not the saints, his diary entries are often brooding and pessimistic.²² The religious world in which Jacob lives is not unlike that of his father, but somehow his response was more personal and disclosing, especially since he frequently reflects upon his own faith journey.

One particular expression of spirituality occurring regularly throughout Jacob's

extensive diary involves a kind of ongoing penitential agony, and connected with it, a struggle for the assurance of faith. In 1851 he confided:

I have resolved to end my slavery to sin and have implored my Saviour for the necessary strength to accomplish this...Let me shudder at the sight of sin and look to Jesus in order to find grace to prevail. Do not judge me, a miserable sinner, my Saviour, but empower me with thy Spirit to work out my salvation.²³

A prayer composed for the children in the school includes a plea for forgiveness and purification and for the strength "to turn our backs on sin."²⁴ Later in the same year he resolves to "vanquish the enemy who frequently threatens to overwhelm me."²⁵ The year 1868 appears to have been one of special struggle and desperation. In June he lamented the perversity of his heart,²⁶ in July he prayed that Jesus might "purge all my sins."²⁷ Some two months later he again expressed anxiety about his soul²⁸ and his sins: "Poor me—I preach repentance and forgiveness of sin to the people through the atoning death of Christ and yet my own heart longs for salvation."²⁹ A few days later he confessed: "Oh if I could totally belong to the Lord Jesus! Alarming doubts about the certainty of my salvation afflict my soul."³⁰ When celebrating his 48th birthday in December he lamented: "Oh how many a sin, how much treachery have I committed during my life. God forgive me all my sins...."³¹ Throughout the diary the short recorded prayers and the listing of sermon topics preached reiterate the theme of repentance and the need for private and public renewal.

It is difficult to interpret Jacob Epp's uneasiness of soul. He taught the biblical stories to the school children during the week and preached the gospel on Sundays, yet struggled for the assurance of sins forgiven and for a sense of liberating faith.³² Faith remained an ongoing aspiration for Epp, a striving to enter the narrow gate while constantly threatened by the imperfections of self and community. Both Jacob and his father David³³ used the term conversion (*Bekehrung*) but never in the sense of a specific spiritual crisis or emotional experience. *Busse* (repentance) meant a turning from sin and subsequently an active combatting of sin until one's dying day. It was not a denial of a redemptive relationship between the individual and God, but more an insistence that the working out of salvation involved "fear and trembling." Spiritual rebirth did occur and was occurring but there was not an attempt to define the exact nature of the salvation experience.

Both Epps were possibly heirs to an idea deeply embedded in their Anabaptist heritage. Like their forebears they accepted justification by faith as proclaimed by Luther, but with Menno Simons argued that the life of discipleship must express itself in the context of the local congregation. The church contended for purity whatever its besetting sins. Salvation though individually experienced, never stood apart from life in the community. For the Epps this included all who were Mennonite and unfortunately the many did not share the religious fervor of the few. It was not a question of salvation by works, but only an insistence that works and correct living were essential to the ongoing redemption.³⁴ Salvation was a labor of faith. One was always in process and there was certainly the hope of salvation, but one could never know for certain until the end. In a sense one was "in conversion"

throughout life. Little wonder that Epp could never understand the later Brethren insistence that a religious crisis experience, whether instantaneous or protracted, emotional or pragmatic, could generate salvation assurance and ultimate certainty.

Most serious Mennonite Christians living in mid-nineteenth century Russia were probably not unlike Jacob Epp in their view of salvation. They stood in a long tradition of piety which equated genuine faith with a circumspect lifestyle and consistent behaviour. Faith and works went hand in hand. For them the Christian experience became a somber vigil against sin, a travail and struggle to uphold goodness, a being "faithful unto death."

Towards a New Pathway

Shortly after the mid-nineteenth century a few Mennonites pursuing their private spirituality or meeting in small groups discovered a dramatic salvation theology through the Scriptures. What caused the shift in exegesis? Had the reading of alien books and devotional material suddenly generated a new definition of conversion? *Kleine Gemeinde* leaders had earlier ensured the circulation of some Anabaptist materials, but did these impact readers in the 1850s? By the 1860s some Mennonites studied the pietistic sermons of Ludwig Hofacker (1798-1828), the English revivalist Spurgeon or the Mennonite minister Jacob Denner (1659-1746), but were they of crucial influence in Brethren conversion thinking?

Relatively few of the conversion accounts published in the *Zions-Bote* or recorded in autobiographies and other literature cite the reading of devotional literature as a factor directly instigating personal conversion. An Abraham Peters related how in his early spiritual quest he began to hold family devotions by singing and reading from Hofacker's sermons.³⁵ Being eight kilometers distant from the church meant frequent Sunday worship at home for B.B. Janz. The family sang one or two hymns from the *Dreiband* and read a lengthy portion from Hofacker's sermons.³⁶ The later Brethren elder in Einlage, Aron Lepp, initially sought to "improve" his life by reading Friedrich Starke's *Handbuch* but was actually converted through meditating upon Hofacker's sermons.³⁷ Another Brethren convert relates how he and his neighbour, Jacob Wiens, read a book of sermons prior to conversion, but does not specify the author.³⁸ Others report reading the verses of various songs in *Glaubensstimme* and *Frohe Botschaft*,³⁹ or simply hearing songs sung.⁴⁰ One informant speaks of reading "religious books,"⁴¹ two others cite specific titles,⁴² and a fourth recalls reading martyr stories.⁴³ Documents collected by P.M. Friesen report the reading of Baptist missionary periodicals by the Brethren in Einlage,⁴⁴ that Jacob Reimer of Gnadenfeld read a biography of Anne Judson, that by 1860 he subscribed to a periodical called *Friedensglocke* and that he received an evangelical tract from Switzerland.⁴⁵ Bekker recalls that he was

sent to the Saratov colonies as “a seller of religious books” but then goes on to specify that he “was to distribute Bibles and Testaments among them.”⁴⁶ He also notes that while Johann Claassen was in St. Petersburg seeking recognition for the new movement, Claassen obtained “a booklet on baptism by immersion.”⁴⁷

While the 1850s and 1860s provide the first hints for the broadening of Mennonite intellectual and spiritual horizons it seems reasonable to argue that the reading of religious books was still an isolated activity among the Brethren. It was rather exclusive spirituality, only impacting those with literary aspirations. “Reading” in the nineteenth century Brethren conversion accounts usually implied the study of the Scriptures, privately or with likeminded seekers. Only rarely did they come to an understanding of the Scriptures via other books.⁴⁸

The first manifestation of a more radical salvation theology involves the 1853 conversion of a young man in the village of Neu-Kronsweide. His spontaneous witness apparently spawned a small group of local believers whose circumspect life-style commanded respect. Even the regional elder, Jacob Hildebrand, felt positively towards them and the term *die Frommen* (the pious ones) was locally applied, not in derision but as a compliment. The revival rapidly radicalized and elder Hildebrand soon spoke of the dissidents’ “rather loudly expressed joy.” The so-called *Froehliche Richtung* (the exuberance movement) which lasted for almost a decade, witnessed the sometimes reckless celebration of the experiential by self-appointed and strong willed leaders. The second issue was closely related. Voices amidst the dissenters demanded separation from the existing religious order which they felt was corrupted by custom and tradition. The new rejected everything associated with the old—leaders, sermons, hymns and worship styles. Such vigorous separatism inherently brought with it the obligation of some sort of religious reconstruction.

The South German pietist and preacher Eduard Wuest was certainly a participant in that reconstruction. He came to the Ukraine in 1845 to serve a group of migrants in Neuhoftnung who were members of the *Bruedergemeinde*, a pietistic movement originating in Kornthal near Stuttgart in 1819.⁴⁹ Like John Wesley’s Methodists in England they equated vital Christianity with an identifiable conversion and the life of sanctification. Wuest, already considered a nonconformist in Germany, brought a dramatic pulpit style and a radical salvation message to the Ukrainian steppes.⁵⁰ He interpreted the new birth as a decisive, overwhelming experience expressing itself in inner joy. It was a dramatic event accompanied by a deep sense of sin and an intense struggle which climaxed in a lasting sense of salvation assurance.

Did Wuest’s concept of the new birth impact the Brethren theology of conversion, especially in its formative stages? We do know something about the nature of Wuest’s contacts with the Mennonites. He was invited to participate in the annual Gnadenfeld mission festival as early as 1846 and had active contact with a number of Molotschna and Berdyansk ministers and elders until his death in 1859.⁵¹ A signatory to the 1860 secession document, Jacob Bekker recalled that he frequently “travelled together with Wuest in wagons loaded with people” to

specific conferences.⁵² In his conversion account he remembers attending two home fellowship meetings in Rudnerweide which were frequented by Wuest whenever he was in the vicinity.⁵³ Was such sporadic contact capable of moulding a new conversion theology? Only a qualified answer is possible. Clearly a number of the Brethren like Jacob Reimer and Johann Claassen originally belonged to the "Wuest group" and were nurtured by him, yet except for Jacob Bekker, we know nothing of their conversions or Wuest's role in the process. Bekker relates how, as a young man, he participated in all the "ecclesiastical formalities" of the Mennonite church of his day, but with no sense of repentance or personal faith. His first religious stirrings came via the sound of singing from a local house meeting and were accentuated via a converted brother-in-law and the sudden death of a neighbour. His conversion in 1853 was an introspective process involving intense penitential agony and much prayer. He then joined a Bible study group in Rudnerweide, an interaction which solidified both his sense of joy and salvation assurance.⁵⁴

Bekker credits Wuest with being a "lasting blessing," but in the sense that Wuest's visits to Mennonite house groups provided spiritual nurture after his conversion. Abraham Peters' conversion in 1853 was also impacted by these home Bible studies. "Many Lutherans and also Mennonites began to leave the rigid formalism of the Old Church and read the Word of God in the family and in assemblies of likeminded individuals, until people were converted to the Saviour."⁵⁵ Like Bekker, Peters also mentions the mission festivals where Wuest preached. Perhaps Wuest's occasional presence gave shape and form to what was originally an indigenous, quietistic and varied spiritual pathway. He may have helped to mould an emerging theology of conversion. Elements of his soteriology also find expression in later nineteenth century conversion accounts with their emphasis on spiritual catharsis and salvation assurance, but here another influence may have been at work.

The Brethren had scarcely seceded from the Old Church when they found new friends among the Baptists from Germany. Their founder, Johann Gerhard Oncken, affirmed an experiential Christianity which stressed the conversion experience, baptism on faith and circumspect discipleship. In a sense the Baptists took over where Wuest left off. All the evidence suggests that the lengthy and intense interaction between Brethren and Baptists was a post-1860 affair.

From the standpoint of the Brethren, Baptist help arrived at a time of loneliness and alienation. Having rejected much of the old, the Brethren needed stability and modelling. The subsequent contact was broad ranging and revolved around issues like immersion baptism, orderly worship, conference structure and a confession of faith. The fact that the Baptists spoke the same language of conversion reinforced Brethren salvation theology. Their presence was not only stabilizing but sustaining. Reports from the 1890s still feature Baptist ministers circulating among Brethren house groups and congregations, travelling jointly with Brethren as itinerate ministers and conducting Bible conferences. Such intimacy did not seriously alter the indigenous Brethren understanding of conversion, since each

understood the other's religious language and agreed on the patterns and processes associated with the new birth. Baptists attending Brethren communion usually related their conversion prior to participation and their story was readily comprehended and affirmed.

The Conversion Process

Viewed from a long term perspective, an early stage in Brethren conversion often involved disillusionment with the religious experience in the Old Church. While many of the accounts allude to such disenchantment few articulate it in detail. Isaak P. Braun is an exception. In his autobiography he writes:

I became a member of the Lichtenau [Mennonite] church through effusion baptism. I still remember the words of the Blumenort elder Jakob Toews, who while we were still on our knees after the ceremony, said: 'you are now living stones added to the structure of God's Temple! Those words 'as living stones' were riveted in my conscience. I looked at the large number of lads and lassies whom I knew, but found none [of that description].⁵⁶

A Franz Nickel related how, while still in Prussia, he requested religious instruction from his local elder. Isaac Kopper was a serious pastor who made sure that every baptismal candidate knew the questions and answers from the catechism. Each candidate was requested to give a written response to several questions. In Nickel's case one of the questions related to salvation assurance.

This last question caused me a lot of consternation since I knew that as yet I had no assurance of salvation. I waited to give my written answer until the very last day but received no assurance. I prayed to the Lord but all remained dark in my heart. What should I write? I was appalled by the thought of lying and so I stated that I was not certain. Surely I would not be admitted to baptism. I nevertheless decided to stick with the truth and declared openly in my response that I had not yet received forgiveness of my sin and possessed no assurance of salvation, but hoped that God would grant it to me. With a trembling heart I took my response and went to church on Sunday...The elder collected the notes and began to read... Finally it was my turn. Trembling, I handed my note to the elder. After he had glanced at it he read it aloud in its entirety and praised me above the others. I was admitted to baptism. For me this was a negative and not a blessed experience.⁵⁷

Nickel then relates how his Old Church baptismal experience lulled him into a false sense of religious security which was shattered by the death of one of his children.

This sense of being mislead or even betrayed by the spirituality of the Old Church figures substantially in the conversion accounts of the early Mennonite Brethren. One complained that she joined the church at 19 but experienced no change of heart.⁵⁸ A Jacob Boldt lamented that he "became a church member but no child of God."⁵⁹ An Old Church minister related how he experienced a quietistic

conversion only after he had been installed in his office, and how he subsequently joined the Brethren.⁶⁰ A frequently used term designating baptism and church affiliation in the Old Church was that of *gross werden*. Transliterated it might mean growing up, but in the socio-religious setting of the day it usually implied a coming of age. As Anna Holzrichter expressed it when she joined the church at 19, "I was now grown up and I married not long after."⁶¹ When Hela Enns commenced her catechism instruction she simply observed: "I was supposed to grow up."⁶² In speaking of her intention to join the church Maria Harder simply commented: "I had decided to grow up."⁶³ Church affiliation through baptism was often followed by marriage. Some expected this sequential maturation process to generate a satisfying spirituality only to find their religious crisis intensifying.⁶⁴ Several accounts portray this coming of age as a collective decision made jointly by friends so they might begin to play an adult role in the life of the community.⁶⁵

Sin and Consciousness of Sin

The remarkable diaries of David and Jakob Epp clearly specify the cardinal shortcomings of Russian Mennonite society. David Epp, a Chortitza minister and community leader, complained in his diary about the "drinking of strong brandy" which occurred locally and at the annual fairs and resulted in disorderly conduct, fighting, wife beating, injury and occasional accidental death.⁶⁶ There were other problems: dancing at weddings,⁶⁷ "fornication and licentious behaviour"⁶⁸ which found expression in specific cases of premarital sex, adultery and of course, illegitimacy.⁶⁹ The Chortitza community was no stranger to the normal human failings—David Epp recorded assaults, quarrels, thefts, contract disputes, and juvenile delinquency. In later years his son Jacob mentioned similar concerns in his diary. When revival emerged in these localities during the 1850s and 1860s, it was natural that the description of sin reflected violations of known community norms.

This dynamic finds clear expression in the surviving conversion accounts. The definition or consciousness of sin was often connected with specific practices within the larger Mennonite community. One frequently mentioned but rarely defined area of transgression involved participation in the *Gesellschaft* (the group)⁷⁰ or the *boese Gesellschaft*⁷¹ (the bad company). The terms usually designated a group of village young people regularly given to late-night carousing which often involved dancing and card playing.⁷² Both genders confessed to these activities.

The male informants usually added two additional sins to the list: drinking and smoking. This is not surprising since the use of tobacco in the Russian Mennonite villages of the 1870s and 1880s was widespread and habitual. Many of these later converts associated their use of nicotine with ongoing alcoholism.⁷³ A Wilhelm

Dueckman cited his addiction to alcohol, tobacco and snuff in the early 1880s as a reason for his ensuing despair and contemplation of suicide.⁷⁴

In almost one half of the documents, sins committed and sins remembered related to participation in the local youth group.⁷⁵ Some used words like “youthful pleasures”⁷⁶ or the “pleasures of this world.”⁷⁷ In all cases the context of sin or sinful living was that of the local village. For the younger spiritual seekers such social pressures were cited as serious impediments to conversion. An anonymous informant relates how, amidst his intensifying personal crisis, he tried to extricate himself from the “village gang.”⁷⁸ Others equate the gradual elimination of these village sins with the beginning of their conversion process.⁷⁹

It is not surprising that the Brethren converts’ catalogue of pre-conversion sins included village group activities such as dancing and card playing as well as personal addictions like alcohol, tobacco and habitual cursing. When they cited consciousness of sin as a part of the conversion process, however, they usually focused on the universal character of sin rather than specific personal transgressions. Some spoke of a long-standing sense of sinfulness enduring for years or even a decade.⁸⁰ Others spoke specifically about their “oppressive burden of sin,”⁸¹ their deep sense of sin,⁸² their anguish about their sin,⁸³ or their fear and trepidation with regard to sin.⁸⁴

The most frequent term used to describe the penitential agony associated with this consciousness of sin was the German word *Angst*. When Justina Wiebe was in the process of conversion during 1865 she was overcome by an ongoing soul crisis characterized by great inner terror, visions and the fear of hell. This great anguish of soul (*grosse Seelenangst*) recurred intermittently for months on end. The detailed sequence of her spiritual crisis was still fresh and vivid when she recorded her conversion on April 11, 1866.⁸⁵ The expression *grosse Angst* (great fear/anxiety/uneasiness) occurs with some regularity in the accounts and is usually associated with fear of hell, deep conviction of sin, or the fear of being eternally lost. Such *Angst* could be sudden and momentary or periodic and augmentative in character. In each case it was viewed as an accumulating crisis of soul.⁸⁶ It could last for weeks, months, or even years. While all of the spiritual seekers found peace there are almost no accounts of “easy” or instantaneous conversions. *Angst* is often the beginning of a process involving repentance from sin, ongoing prayer, a searching of the Scriptures or the seeking of counsel from known Christians. Some use the words *durchkommen*⁸⁷ (getting/pulling through) or *ringen*⁸⁸ (wrestling/struggling/contending).

This sense of fear and anguish associated with penance was not necessarily a negative process contending only with sin and guilt. It was also an active search for belief and understanding that went beyond mere intellectual assent. Deploying ongoing prayer and an intense search of the Scriptures it sought for the emotional affirmation of the heart. B.B. Janz, the Mennonite emigration leader of the 1920s, described a portion of his 1895 experience of being “in conversion” as follows:

Within the teacher everything remained dark. The finest verses of promise were of no avail, acceptance by faith was lacking. Late one Saturday evening Isaiah chapter 43

spoke clearly and penetratingly. "Yes, but who will tell me that this is my personal possession? How lovely for those who are accepted, but you are not, you simply have nothing. This very night the matter must be resolved. If you totally commit yourself in prayer and struggle, something great will happen." The struggle for the forgiveness of all sin became more and more difficult, but the lips would not utter the word of total surrender. Something demanded postponement, even if for several hours. This (total surrender) was the most difficult battle to win—to be or not to be. Finally, the prodigal son broke through the barrier. With repeated promises of self-surrender, he waited with anticipation but nothing happened inwardly or outwardly. Must not He, the Lord and Saviour, answer? And again and again confession and self-surrender and Isaiah 43:25....There was no response from above. The sinner finally went to bed confused and disappointed.⁸⁹

What little we know of other second generation Brethren leaders seems to confirm the notion of an extended penitential struggle. While still in Russia during the 1870s, the later elder among the American Brethren, Heinrich H. Voth, found peace "after much prayer and agony of soul."⁹⁰ Similarly the minister and teacher A.H. Unruh recounts a lengthy search for peace of heart.⁹¹ Recalling his conversion in 1885 the minister P. E. Penner speaks of an "awful fear about my lost condition" and the ensuing struggle which extended over several months.⁹² A J.H. Voth observed that a "great fear and anxiety overpowered me," which lasted for several weeks.⁹³

B.B. Janz's concept of being "in conversion" best typifies the varied potential experiences described in the majority of the accounts. The process generated incredible inner crisis, it was lengthy and turbulent and, viewed retrospectively, moved gradually towards a spiritual climax. No matter how stoical, rational, or mercurial the informant, there came the "moment of truth" when the agonizing search was over. Amid deep emotion frequently involving joy and tears the individual reached a state of assurance. Faith and peace replaced anxiety and fear. There was an acquiescence, a giving in, which combined with the sense of being overwhelmed by feelings of well-being. A song or a Scripture passage was suddenly understood with utter clarity. Ecstasy, happiness and newness best described successive waves of feelings. Amid the joyous turmoil was the sense of complete and unassailable faith. Truth known in the mind was affirmed by the heart.

J.H. Vogt spoke of "a wonderful peace flowing over me," while P.E. Penner remembered being "in prayer with tears of joy." A.H. Unruh writes: "At that moment a ray of light fell into my heart." B.B. Janz explains his experience in greater detail.

What boundless happiness now filled a heart so plagued for many months. A flood of emotion overwhelmed the heart, but no word was uttered about this change—salvation had been imparted. More people entered [the service] and he [Janz] was obliged to move forward. Of the sermon he remembered nothing. When the service came to a close his soul felt so overwhelmed that the shy young man acknowledged his Saviour in a personal prayer and thanked Him out of the depths of being. He had had no plan or thought of doing this and was surprised at himself—what had he done?⁹⁴

The *Zions-Bote* accounts reflect similar patterns. Franz Nickel observed that "while I prayed...a light which I saw streamed over me and a voice spoke in my heart."⁹⁵ After a long struggle Peter Wiens recalled that "suddenly everything was so unburdensome to me and I could believe."⁹⁶ Helena Braun heard a voice telling her that her sins were forgiven, "then faith entered my heart."⁹⁷ For Justina Peters it seemed like "a bright morning star suddenly rose in my heart and as if a special power touched me."⁹⁸ Others noted that the "peace of God shone into my soul,"⁹⁹ that they "became happy,"¹⁰⁰ or simply that they could believe and had assurance of sins forgiven.¹⁰¹ Some simply declared that they suddenly felt at peace or free of burdens.¹⁰²

The "moment of conversion" in the collective descriptions of the nineteenth century Brethren compare favourably with corresponding accounts from the larger contemporary Christian world. The context of these conversions, however, invite special comment. Whether in Russia or frontier America the converts invariably found themselves in the familial village and Old Church structures of that day. During the first decades of the Brethren, conversion meant defying established borders and breaking out of existing societal patterns. Public or family censure invariably followed. Converts left the known and familiar in order to establish a new Christian community which essentially functioned as a sub-culture within the prevailing parameters. By and large nineteenth century Brethren congregations were small and scattered. Once established they provided the context for most of the conversions.

These small congregations usually did not possess their own church building. Even at the dawn of the twentieth century many groups still gathered in homes or in the local school. In the Molotschna the Brethren established their first permanent meeting place in 1874 by utilizing a onetime pub in Rueckenau. These home or school services were variously referred to as *Abendstunden*, *Bibelstunden*, *Erbauungsstunden* and *Abendversammlungen*. The terms usually described a Bible study held in the home by a few families or reflect a more formal evening service in the local school featuring singing and preaching by an itinerant minister. Katharina Georg was converted when three Brethren from Sagradovka conducted services in her home.¹⁰³ Converts related how they were initially attracted to the Brethren by their caring and accepting ways, then began to attend a series of evening services which led to their conversion.¹⁰⁴ A young adult reported how, in 1884, she visited her neighbors, the Klaassens, "where we sang and prayed" and where she was subsequently converted.¹⁰⁵

Many converts were attracted to the Brethren by the strong relational qualities which they demonstrated. While itinerant ministers conducted formal home visitations and engaged in personal work, most of the contacts were informal and spontaneous interactions common to life in the village. One woman in Rueckenau became friends with the wife of the first Brethren elder, Heinrich Huebert, in the village of Rueckenau.¹⁰⁶ Another related how Brethren came to pray with her during family illness,¹⁰⁷ while Elizabeth Janz described how local believers prayed for her during a difficult childbirth.¹⁰⁸ It was not

unusual that friendships between women also brought their spouses in contact with the Brethren.¹⁰⁹ When Johann Loewen sent for a Brethren homeopath, the good doctor not only brought medicine but another brother to minister to him spiritually.¹¹⁰ Heinrich Loeppky and his wife came in contact with the Brethren via a fellowship meal “where we were gently treated [by them].”¹¹¹ For Jakob Loewen it was simply a matter of rubbing shoulders with them in the village, then attending services and hearing his first sermons on repentance.¹¹² Abraham Isaak lived with a Brethren family while engaged in construction.¹¹³ Some seekers who attended meetings encountered rather direct inquiries concerning the welfare of their soul and their relationship with Christ.¹¹⁴ Jakob Boldt of the Memrik settlement recalls that “the Brethren often spoke with me about my soul’s welfare,”¹¹⁵ but they were also available to pray with him and his wife during the height of their spiritual crisis.

In the later nineteenth century a unique practice related to conversion developed among the Brethren. New converts publically testified to their new found faith by offering a public prayer of thanksgiving during the open prayer time associated with Sunday worship or home Bible study. A shy B.B. Janz “acknowledged his Saviour in personal prayer and thanked him out of the depths of his being”¹¹⁶ at the end of the service. When P.E. Penner experienced the joy of sins forgiven in 1885 “[he] broke out in loud thanksgiving to the Lord in prayer with tears of joy....”¹¹⁷ During an evening service H.W. Regier could not restrain himself and “began to pray publically in the assembly.”¹¹⁸ Following her conversion in 1888 Aganetha Nickel found that she “could pray publically.”¹¹⁹ In some instances public prayer signified being “in conversion” and carried with it the connotations of confessing Christ before others. In the case of Helena Klassen true peace only came after her public prayer.¹²⁰ M. Fraechner relates how he regularly attended evening meetings “but could not pray in the assembly” until he found genuine assurance of faith in 1872. Then public prayer became easy.¹²¹ Both Alwina Schmidt¹²² and Margaretha Rahn could only “thank God for his grace”¹²³ following the climax of their penitential struggle.

Confession played a significant role in Brethren conversion and was usually associated with some stage of the penitential agony. A husband “confessed what oppressed me”¹²⁴ to his marriage partner. In the depths of despair an Isaak Braun “went to a dear brother and told him everything.”¹²⁵ During her four year struggle for inner peace Aganeta Regehr felt “increasingly tormented by sin” and so went to confess to a friend.¹²⁶ Peter Toews was deeply moved in 1879 when he saw a man on his knees confessing his sins before the assembled congregation. Not long after he too made private confession and found peace.¹²⁷ Most of the confessions were private and most represented an advanced or even climactical stage in the protracted conversions so common in the later decades of the nineteenth century.¹²⁸

Some Concluding Comments

In his day Elder Jacob Hildebrand made some succinct observations about the Chortitza revival of the 1850s.

One clearly felt the rustling of the wind about which Christ said to Nicodemus 'You know not whither it comes or where it goes.'...it illuminated the churches like the dawn of a new day...Father especially rejoiced with the newly converted who so openly declared their assurance of the forgiveness of sin...and even viewed their initial, rather loudly expressed joy...as scriptural.¹²⁹

In partial contrast Jacob Bekker's conversion in 1853 was a more quietistic "coming of faith." It involved a personal study of the Scriptures, the use of a prayer book, participation in an existing Bible study group, a deep awareness of sin and a lengthly penitential agony. "Gradually my heart lightened so that I believed my sins were forgiven."¹³⁰ Later at a Bible study held on the third day of Christmas, 1854, he "experienced intense joy for I felt absolutely certain that the Saviour had been born in me...my heart leapt for joy because I knew I was a child of God."¹³¹ The other Brethren founder, Abraham Peters, only reports that between 1853-1855 he and his wife "read the word in the family and together with like-minded people in [small] groups, until people were converted to the Saviour."¹³²

The pre-1860 profile of conversion appears to have been typified by gradualism, Bible study, fellowship groups, the assurance of salvation and the experience and celebration of joy. During the 1850s Wuest's preaching with its emphasis on sin and a penitential struggle climaxing in salvation assurance probably impacted the early Brethren concept of conversion by more sharply defining the process itself. German Baptist influence after 1860 did not differ significantly from Wuest. Though this imported piety shaped and even sustained the early Brethren view of the new birth, its long-term influence was probably marginal. Corporate leadership, conference organization, the practice of community exegesis and the regularized teaching role of the itinerant ministers all played a solidifying role internally. The varied accounts do not indicate that the concept of conversion underwent any dramatic change in the late nineteenth century, but they do allow a more precise documentation of the experience.

Some elements of the old remain readily identifiable: the deep consciousness of sin, the long penitential agony, participation in group Bible study and the celebration of salvation assurance. The accounts nevertheless significantly augment the knowledge of the old. There is a clearer definition of what is considered to be sin. It is seen against the background of Scripture, and it was this divine revelation which illuminated the significance of sin for the individual. The sequence of the penitential crisis, though differing in intensity, is graphically described. Regardless of the gender, temperament or personality of the individual informant, the concept of such soul agony is constant, though its length is varied. Similarly the culmination of the crisis uniformly brings the joyous conviction of sins forgiven and a strong sense of salvation assurance, which is accompanied by

ecstasy and happiness. In retrospect all the new believers look upon their conversion as the most momentous event in their lives.

The converting individual, almost without exception, is a mature adult who is often married and a member of the Old Church. Conversion inevitably brings with it another crisis: the need to select a new peoplehood. For the new believer this meant rebaptism and affiliation with the Brethren. Baptism without church membership was inconceivable. Many of the documents, often written years after the event, make it absolutely clear that belonging to the fellowship, however small and remote it might be, marked a permanent commitment. They frequently laud the vital spirituality and intimacy which joining the *Geschwister*¹³³ brought to their lives. In their recollections some individuals provide a rare portrait of the Brethren house church in action both as an agent of evangelism and as a care-giver for new Christians. There are also surprising sidelights on the evolving church policy and practice of the Brethren.

Nineteenth century Brethren conversions, whether protracted or instantaneous, usually duplicate the evangelical experience associated with reformation Protestantism but with a decidedly pietistical touch. The expression *meine Erfahrung* (my experience) was frequently used by converts articulating their inner journey. It implied a strong element of subjectivity and emotion. A biblical theology involving sin, grace, and salvation was affirmed experientially. The event is presented as dramatic and life changing and consequently functioned as a key reference point in the further practice of Christian piety. This pre-occupation with "my experience" generated two possible dangers. First, experience became the primary method of authenticating the objective truth of Scripture and inadvertently a measure against which all other Christians were judged. Such a tight "border control" of the Christian experience restricted contact with other serious Christians and contributed significantly to Brethren-Old Church tensions. Secondly, there was the peril of creating an isolated, self-seeking spirituality which only sought to augment the rapture of the original redemption experience. Such piety remained preoccupied with the edification and enjoyment of religion, a blissful form of devotion which might well neglect the demands of discipleship. The new birth became a frequent reference point in the practice of everyday Brethren piety: beginnings were reviewed again and again.

Did this lay piety which stressed the experiential and personal, catapult the early Brethren into the celebrative spirituality of radical pietism which insisted on spending time alone with Jesus in the garden but avoided confrontation with the world? Brethren gatherings featured prayers, Scripture reading, singing, testimonies and the recounting of conversions. Such meetings were intimate and rich in their relational qualities. Belonging meant openness, empathy and vulnerability. Did community and the celebration of community become an end in itself? The varied references to sermon themes and the songs of the *Dreiband* suggest an affirmative answer. Fortunately there were counter-balancing forces at work.

The early Brethren were deeply concerned with the purity of the Church. They felt called to become a distinct society amidst existing Mennonitism. Witness to the

larger community meant a circumspect discipleship given to sobriety. Holiness within and without was corporately, not individually defined. While the congregation might engage in occasional pietistic celebration, the “world” surrounded them and interacted with them. They could not live in isolation. The obligations to the larger community became an ongoing balancing factor.

There was another dimension. The pursuit of religious ecstasy and the celebration of the inner life always occurred in a congregational context. Dominant personalities could not impose definitions of piety upon a participatory community. People may have read the Word in private, but its delineation and application was subject to corporate scrutiny. The real danger of the Brethren concern with conversion lay in another area. By celebrating the reality of the new birth and repeatedly recalling the experience the nineteenth century Brethren may have restricted and conventionalized their concept of conversion and in the process they may have become more conservative than their founders.

Notes

¹Jakob Bekker, “Meine Erfahrung,” *Zions-Bote*, no. 17(1900), pp. 1-2.

²Abraham Peters, “Bericht,” *Zions-Bote*, no. 11(1899), p. 3.

³The first five years of the *Zions-Bote* (1885-1889) are apparently lost, as are the years 1892-1893. The 156 accounts are from the surviving volumes between 1890-1900.

⁴Cornelius Hildebrand, “Aus der Kronsweider Erweckungszeit,” *Der Botschafter*, viii(1913), nos. 6, 8-19.

⁵M.F., “Meine Erfahrung,” *Zions-Bote*, no. 11(1896), p. 3.

⁶Emilie Siemens, “Meine Bekehrung,” *Zions-Bote*, no. 9(1898), pp. 3-4.

⁷Johann Heide, “Meine Erfahrung,” *Zions-Bote*, no. 16(1898), p. 2.

⁸S.M., “Erfahrungen einer Schwester,” *Zions-Bote*, no. 21(1897), p. 5.

⁹Maria Martens, “Meine Bekehrung,” *Zions-Bote*, no. 31(1897), pp. 2-3.

¹⁰Heinrich Loepky, “Meine Bekehrung,” *Zions-Bote*, no. 8(1899), p. 3.

¹¹Abraham Bergen, “Meine Bekehrung,” *Zions-Bote*, No. 4(1899), p. 2.

¹²D.D.F., “Meine Erfahrung,” *Zions-Bote* no. 18(1900), pp. 2-3.

¹³Johann Loewen, “Meine Bekehrung,” *Zions-Bote*, no. 50(1898), pp. 3-4.

¹⁴Delbert Plett has recently demonstrated the remarkable accomplishments of *Kleine Gemeinde* leaders in promoting religious publication. As early as 1827 they published (probably in Germany) a German translation of Peter Peters’ *Spiegel der Gierigkeit*. This was followed a few years later (1834) by the publication of Menno Simons’ *Fundamentbuch*. In 1845 the *Kleine Gemeinde* elder, Abraham Friesen, published a polemic, *Einfache Erklarung* (Danzig, 1845). Three more publications followed in the 1860s: J.P. Schabelje’s *Die wandelnde Seele* (Stuttgart, 1860); *Das Kleine Maertyrerbuch* (Stuttgart, 1863); Peter Peters’ *Ausgewahlte Schriften* (Stuttgart, 1865). See Delbert Plett, *The Golden Years: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia (1812-1849)*, (Steinbach, D.F.P. Publications, 1985), pp. 318ff.

¹⁵Klaas Reimer wrote, "Now the good and evil within me came into a tremendous spirited conflict with each other." *Ibid*, p. 149.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 249-251.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 215-218.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 219-229.

¹⁹Dietrich Gaeddert Diary (Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas). See also John B. Toews, "A Russian Mennonite: The Diary of Dietrich Gaeddert," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 33, no. 4(December, 1978), pp. 10-18.

²⁰David Epp Diaries (Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba); Jacob Epp Diaries (Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba). An excellent English edition of a segment of these diaries can be found in Harvey L. Dyck, *A Mennonite in Russia. The Diaries of Jacob D. Epp. 1851-1880* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991).

²¹See for example the 1837 entries in the David Epp Diaries, July 31; August 8, 28; September 5, 26; November 7. Also September 7, 1841. With the exception of his Christmas texts (December 25, 26), almost all of Jacob's sermons during 1860 focus upon the atonement and the need for repentance and renewal. Jacob Epp Diaries, January 18, 24; February 7, 14, 23, 28; March 5, 13, 20, 27; April 4, 10; May 29; July 7, 28; August 28; September 4, 11; October 16, 23, 30; November 6, 20; December 4, 18.

²²David Epp Diaries, July 15, 1837; January 27, 1838; February 27, 1838; March 6, 1838; December 27, 1842.

²³Jacob D. Epp Diaries (Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba) June 26, 1851.

²⁴October 10, 1851.

²⁵November 17, 1851.

²⁶June 18, 1868.

²⁷July 18, 1868.

²⁸September 7, 1868.

²⁹September 22, 1868.

³⁰September 25, 1868.

³¹December 26, 1868.

³²See for example: October 27, 1863; June 25, 1865; October 17, 1865.

³³David Epp Diary, December 31, 1841.

³⁴When referring to life in the Old Church, some Brethren converts used terms like "fromm leben" (living piously). *Zions-Bote*, no. 20, p. 3.

³⁵Abraham Peters, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 32(1891), p. 1.

³⁶B.B. Janz Papers (Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba), "Meine Heimkehr," pp. 2-3. The Brethren used some three hymnals, *Frohe Botschaft*, *Glaubensstimme*, and *Heimatlaenge*. These were later combined into the *Dreiband*.

³⁷P.M. Friesen, p. 240.

³⁸M. Janzen, "Die Bekehrung eines Bruders," *Zions-Bote*, no. 17(1894), pp. 2-3.

³⁹Johann Neck, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 46(1894), pp. 2-3; Heinrich Penner, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 38(1894), p. 3.

⁴⁰A.N., "Bekehrung eines Verlorenen," *Zions-Bote*, no. 18(1897), pp. 2-3.

⁴¹P.B., "Wie der Herr mich gesucht und gefunden," *Zions-Bote*, no. 27(1899), p. 2.

⁴²Franz Dueck, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 17(1891); J., "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 49, p. 1.

⁴³Daniel Reimer, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 7(1897), p. 2.

⁴⁴P.M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland*, (Halbstadt, 1911), p. 239.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 242-243.

⁴⁶Jakob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas, M.B. Publishing House, 1973), p. 38.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴⁸A concurrent dissenting movement among the Russian Mennonites, the Templars, were possibly more rationalistic, elitist, and more dependent on German religious publications. The absence of foreign literature among the Brethren is puzzling. Though adherents came from all levels of society, a surprising number belonged to the intelligentsia. See James Urry, "The Social Background to the Emergence of the Mennonite Brethren in Nineteenth Century Russia," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 6(1988), pp. 8-35; Bekker, pp. 27, 36-37, 82-85, 96-97.

⁴⁹The group was influenced by men like Johann Bengel (1687-1752) and Johann Hahn (1759-1819). They subscribed to the notion of small group meetings (*Stunden* or conventicles) where believers shared their problems and concerns.

⁵⁰Wuest may have been influenced by Christian Gottlieb Pregizer (1751-1824) who taught that new life in Christ was signified by profound ongoing joy and the assurance of sins forgiven. Some within his sphere of influence held meetings which featured lively hymn tunes accompanied by the zither and ecstatic shouting. Gotthold Muller, *Christian Gottlieb Pregizer Biographie und Nachlass*, (Stuttgart, 1962). Wuest's impact on his listeners may well have been a question of contrast to existing orthodox practices rather than inherent radicalism.

⁵¹A. Kroeker, *Pfarrer Eduard Wuest* (Leipzig, 1903), pp. 77, 79-80.

⁵²Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 26-27. The famous preacher and poet Bernhard Harder (1832-1884) was strongly influenced by Hofacker and converted under Wuest as a young man, but never joined the Brethren. He was apparently repulsed by their celebrative excesses and demand for rebaptism. P.M. Friesen, p. 743ff. Two Harder letters in the possession of the Mennonite Library and Archives (N. Newton, Kansas) reiterate and elaborate the above concerns and add two others: their spiritual arrogance and aggressive proselytizing. B. Harder to Fast, March 29, 1872; B. Harder to Johannes Harder, March 29, 1872.

⁵³Jakob Bekker, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 17(1900), pp. 1-2. Bekker specifically mentions the Abraham Matthies and Dietrich Dueck residences in Rudnerweide. Kröker, *Wuest*, pp. 77, notes that Matthies was a minister in the local church.

⁵⁴Bekker, *Zions-Bote*, no. 17(1900), pp. 1-2.

⁵⁵Abraham Peters, "Bericht," *Zions-Bote*, no. 11(1899), p. 3.

⁵⁶Issak P. Braun, "Lebenslauf," (ms. in the possession of the P.J. Konrad family), p. 5.

⁵⁷Franz Nickel, "Meine Geschichte," *Zions-Bote*, no. 6(1891), p. 2.

⁵⁸Helena Heinrichs, "Meine Erfahrungen," *Zions-Bote*, no. 5(1845), pp. 2-3.

⁵⁹Jacob Boldt, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 4(1898), p. 2.

⁶⁰J. Epp, "Aus meinem Leben," *Zions-Bote*, no. 27(1891), pp. 2-3.

⁶¹Anna Holzrichter, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 8(1895), p. 2-3.

⁶²Helena Enns, "Wie mich der Herr gesucht und gefunden hat," *Zions-Bote*, no. 26(1895), p. 2.

⁶³Maria Harder, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 19(1895), p. 2.

⁶⁴Maria Martens, "Meine Bekehrung," no. 31(1897), pp. 2-3; Peter and Anna Toews, "Meine Bekehrung," no. 19(1899), p. 2

⁶⁵Elizabeth Niehuhr, "Zwei Jahre aus meinem Leben," *Zions-Bote*, 33(1899), p. 4; Jakob

Nickel, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 42(1899), p. 2.

⁶⁶David Epp Diary (Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba), September 9, 1837; January 27, 1838; February 27, 1838; March 3, 6, 1838; August 21, 1838; February 22, 1842.

⁶⁷December 26, 1838.

⁶⁸December 31, 1841.

⁶⁹See for example the following entries: December 26, 1837; March 6, 1838; October 22, 1838; October 30, 1838; December 7, 1841; April 28, 1842.

⁷⁰See *Zions-Bote*, no. 17(1894); no. 41(1895); nos. 8, 17, 42(1899); no. 16(1900).

⁷¹*Zions-Bote*, no. 27(1894); no. 3(1894); nos. 25-26, 41(1895); nos. 10, 18, 19, 44(1896); no. 24(1898); nos. 17, 47, 48(1899); no. 18(1900).

⁷²J. Epp, "Aus meinem Leben," *Zions-Bote*, no. 27(1891); Abraham Kroecker, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 9(1897), p. 3; Kornelius Warkentin, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 24(1898), pp. 2-3; Peter and Anna Toews, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 19(1899), p. 2.

⁷³*Zions-Bote*, no. 25(1890); no. 18(1891); no. 23(1891); no. 38(1894); no. 10(1895); nos. 1,2(1896); no. 39(1897); no. 8(1899); no. 17(1899); nos. 47, 48(1899); no. 32(1900).

⁷⁴Wilhelm Dueckman, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, nos. 14-15(1890).

⁷⁵Martin Thielman, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 23(1891), p. 2; David Janzen, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 43(1895).

⁷⁶Elizabeth S. Neufeld, "Von einer Schwester," *Zions-Bote*, no. 22(1899), pp. 2-3.

⁷⁷J.B. Siemens, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 14(1894), p. 2; Margaretha Rahn, "Die Bekehrung einer Schwester," *Zions-Bote*, no. 10(1897), pp. 2-3.

⁷⁸A.N., "Bekehrung eines Verlorenen," *Zions-Bote*, no. 18(1897), pp. 2-3; no. 19(1897), pp. 2-3.

⁷⁹Klaas Toews, "Meine Bekehrung und Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 32(1900), p. 3.

⁸⁰A Franz Dueck relates that his feeling of *Suendhaftigkeit* (sinfulness) began in 1861 and only ended with his conversion in the mid-1870s. "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 17(1891), p. 3; C.D.K., "Gerettet wie ein Brand aus dem Feuer," *Zions-Bote*, no. 28(1891), p. 3; K. Schmidt, "Die Bekehrung einer Schwester," *Zions-Bote*, no. 6(1891), p. 3; Friedrich Thomas, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 7(1899), p. 1.

⁸¹"Drueckende Suendenlast," Aganetha Buekert, "Wie der Herr mich gesucht und gefunden," *Zions-Bote*, no. 34(1899), p. 4.

⁸²Heinrich Krause, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 15(1899), pp. 2-3.

⁸³Maria Janssen, "Wie der Herr mich gesucht und gefunden hat," *Zions-Bote*, no. 40(1895), p. 2.

⁸⁴Jacob Boldt, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 4(1898), p. 2; Emilie Siemens, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 9(1898), pp. 3-4.

⁸⁵Justina Wiebe, "Aus der Finsternis zum Licht," *Zions-Bote*, no. 31(1891), p. 2. Justina was the wife of Jacob A. Wiebe, long-time elder and leader of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, who migrated to Kansas in the 1870s. Only one other person in the *Zions-Bote* accounts uses the term *Seelenangst*. See no. 20(1894). This young man observed that this soul anguish made him feel "sick in his soul" and caused him to weep and pray.

⁸⁶See *Zions-Bote*, no. 46(1894); no. 6(1895); no. 10(1895); no. 18(1895); no. 24(1895); no. 8(1897); no. 39(1897); no. 4(1898); no. 39(1898); no. 7(1899); no. 30(1899); no. 33(1899).

⁸⁷"I feared I would not completely pull through." Peter M. Friesen, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 40(1899), p. 3.

⁸⁸Helena Kroecker, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 35, p. 3. Another convert wrote: "I lay on the floor and screamed [so loudly] that, as a friend [later] told me, it could be heard well into the village. H.D. Friesen, *Goettliche Gnadenerweisungen auf meinem Lebenswege*, (Coaldale, Alberta,

1954), p. 7.

⁸⁹B.B. Janz Papers (Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba), *Meine Heimkehr*, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁰J.F. Voth, "My Conversion Testimony," in Henry E. Reimer, *Being Born Again by the Word of God*, (Hillsboro, Kansas, Henry E. Reimer, 1970), pp. 10-11.

⁹¹J.A. Froese, *Witness Extraordinary. A Biography of Elder Heinrich Voth 1851-1918*, (Winnipeg, Christian Press Ltd., 1975), p. 18.

⁹²A.H. Unruh, "The Grace of God in My Life," in Henry E. Reimer, *Being Born Again by the Word of God* (Hillsboro, Kansas, Henry E. Reimer, 1970), pp. 4-6.

⁹³P.E. Penner, "A testimony of the Lord's Saving grace," in Henry E. Reimer, *Being Born Again By the Word of God* (Hillsboro, Kansas, Henry E. Reimer, 1970), pp. 1 24-25. The later *Zions-Bote* editor John F. Harms, recalls his conversion as a teenager ill with typhus. After prayers and confession of his sins to his parents "I experienced instantaneous relief and found peace." John F. Harms, *Eine Lebensreise* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1943), p. 10.

⁹⁴B.B. Janz Papers, "Meine Heimkehr," p. 10.

⁹⁵Franz Nickel, "Meine Geschichte," *Zions-Bote*, no. 6(1891), p. 2.

⁹⁶Peter J. Wiens, "Etwas aus meiner Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 14(1891), p. 2.

⁹⁷Helena Braun, "Meine Bekehrung zum Herrn," *Zions-Bote*, no. 22(1891), p. 2.

⁹⁸Justina Peters, "Eine Bekehrungs-Geschichte," *Zions-Bote*, no. 24(1891), p. 1.

⁹⁹C.D.K., "Gerettet wie ein Brand aus dem Feuer," *Zions-Bote*, no. 28(1891), p. 3.

¹⁰⁰Heinrich Penner, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 38(1894), p. 3.

¹⁰¹Jacob Neufeld, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 41(1894), pp. 3-4; Johann Neck, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 46(1894), pp. 2-3.

¹⁰²See for example Elisabeth Klaassen, "Aus meinen Lebenserfahrungen," *Zions-Bote*, no. 18(1895), p. 2-3; also no. 19(1895), p. 2; no. 22(1895), pp. 2-3; no. 47(1895), p. 2; no. 11(1896), p. 3; no. 44(1896), pp. 2-3; no. 13(1898), p. 3; no. 35(1898), p. 3; no. 34(1899), p. 4.

¹⁰³Katharina Georg, "Bekehrung einer Schwester," *Zions-Bote*, no. 6(1895), pp. 2-3.

¹⁰⁴H.H. Koerber, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 10(1895), p. 2; Katharina Thiessen, "Meine Bekehrung," no. 16(1895), p. 2; also *Zions-Bote*, no. 21(1895), p. 2; no. 7(1895), pp. 2-3; no. 18(1896), p. 2; no. 43(1896), p. 2; no. 44(1896), pp. 2-3; no. 8(1897), pp. 3-4; no. 10(1897), pp. 2-3; no. 30(1897), p. 2; no. 14(1899), p. 1; no. 30(1899), p. 2; no. 33(1899), p. 4; no. 44(1899), p. 2.

¹⁰⁵M.F., "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 11(1896), p. 3.

¹⁰⁶S.M., "Erfahrungen einer Schwester," *Zions-Bote*, no. 21(1897), p. 5.

¹⁰⁷Justina Bese, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 35(1894), p. 2.

¹⁰⁸Elizabeh Janz, "Russland," *Zions-Bote*, no. 21(1891), p. 2.

¹⁰⁹K. Schmidt, "Die Bekehrung einer Schwester," *Zions-Bote*, no. 6(1890), p. 3.

¹¹⁰Johann Loewen, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 50(1898), pp. 2-3.

¹¹¹Heinrich Loepky, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 8(1899), p. 3.

¹¹²Jakob Loewen, "Eine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 17(1899), p. 3.

¹¹³Abraham Isaak, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 22(1895), p. 2.

¹¹⁴Dietrich Kroeker, "Russland," *Zions-Bote*, no. 47(1890), pp. 2-3; also *Zions-Bote*, no. 6(1890), p. 3; no. 26(1895), p. 2; no. 27(1891), pp. 2-3; no. 17(1894), pp. 2-3.

¹¹⁵Jakob Boldt, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 4(1898), p. 2.

¹¹⁶B.B. Janz Papers, "Heimkehr," p. 10.

¹¹⁷P.E. Penner, "A Testimony of the Lord's Saving Grace," in Henry E. Reimer, *Being Born*

Again by the Word of God.

¹¹⁸H.W. Regier, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 3(1895), p. 2.

¹¹⁹Aganatha Nickel, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 24(1895), p. 2.

¹²⁰Helena Klassen, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 29(1895), p. 2; also no. 17(1894), pp. 3-4.

¹²¹M. Fraechner, "Bekehrung und Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 18(1896), p. 2.

¹²²Alwina F. Schmidt, "Meine Errettung von meinen Suenden," *Zions-Bote*, no. 32(1896), p. 3.

¹²³Margaretha Rahn, "Die Bekehrung einer Schwester," *Zions-Bote*, no. 10(1897), pp. 2-3.

¹²⁴H.G., "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 27(1895), p. 2.

¹²⁵Isaak J. Braun, "Die Bekehrung eines Bruders," *Zions-Bote*, no. 41(1895), p. 2.

¹²⁶Aganeta Regehr, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 14(1897), p. 2.

¹²⁷Peter Toews, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 11(1897), p. 5.

¹²⁸Abraham Bergen, "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 12(1900), pp. 2-3; David Janzen "Meine Bekehrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 43(1895), p. 2; J.C. "Einiges etc.," *Zions-Bote*, no. 8(1890), pp. 1-2; Peter Heppner, "Ein Bekehrung," *Zions-bote*, no. 5(1891), p. 2.

¹²⁹In the late nineteenth century Jacob Hildebrand's son Cornelius, possibly using family papers or recalling the stories told by his father penned the story of the revival. See John B. Toews, "The Early Mennonite Brethren: Some Outside Views," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. LVIII, no. 2(April, 1984), p. 96.

¹³⁰Jakob Bekker, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 17(1900), pp. 1-2.

¹³¹*Ibid.*

¹³²Abraham Peters, "Bericht," *Zions-Bote*, no. 11(1899), p. 3.

¹³³The German term *Geschwister*, normally applied to members of the immediate family, is sometimes used by new converts in referring to the new group which they joined. In the context of its usage it implies a new family, a new home, a new identity, and a new relationship of trust and intimacy. See *Zions-Bote*, no. 23(1841); no. 32(1894); no. 16(1895); no. 27(1895); no. 6(1899); no. 17(1899); no. 12(1900). The most frequently used term is simply *Brueder* (Brethren). *Zions-Bote*, nos. 7, 14, 30(1890); nos. 6, 20, 27, 31(1891); nos 11, 27(1894); nos. 18, 19, 22, 43, 44(1895); nos. 8, 21, 31, 39(1897); no. 50(1898); no. 8(1894); no. 8(1900). Very occasionally the expression *die Glaebigen* (the believers) is deployed. *Zions-Bote*, no. 22(1891); no. 9(1898).