

# Images of the City in the Mennonite Brethren *Zionsbote*, 1890-1940

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Mennonite urbanization in North America has often been portrayed against the dramatic backdrop of what Mennonites thought and felt about the city and the land. They condemned the city as a place of sin, it is said, and they had a profound bond—a “romance”—with the land.<sup>1</sup> They elevated rural life to an “unofficial article of faith.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the move to the city, when it began in earnest after World War II, was a contentious process, pitting the pessimism and “ill-informed suspicions” of those who believed cities dangerous to spiritual health against the confidence of those who felt well-equipped to retain or adapt their theological identity in an urban environment.<sup>3</sup> Sociological models have also confronted rural and urban as categories of thought and spirituality, with triumphalist overtones for the city’s contemporary victory.<sup>4</sup>

This study examines this backdrop of ideas by looking at perceptions of the city held by one group, the Mennonite Brethren (MB) of North America, insofar as they can be discerned in the discourse of their denominational periodical, the *Zionsbote*, between 1890 and 1940. It examines how the city entered their print conversation, what words were used about it and what was conveyed by them in the years when Mennonite Brethren in North America were still predominantly rural. It finds that while discourse about the city sometimes reflected the sharp views of the dichotomy

drawn above, it just as often contradicted it. The city written into the *Zionsbote* was not only one place—a place of danger—but was multi-faceted and complex. Discussions of city life were frequently more moderate than might be expected, and often ambivalent. It could be said, further, that the *Zionsbote* mediated strategies for coping with the reality of the city as much as it articulated attitudes against it. The concept of land too was a multi-layered one.

The first Mennonite Brethren came to North America in small groups—perhaps some 200 families in total—and settled in Kansas, Nebraska, Dakota, and Minnesota. By the turn of the century they had also moved on to Oklahoma, Oregon, California and Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Their numbers were augmented by a trickle of ongoing migration from Russia as well as religious “re-grouping” among Mennonites and other Germans in America.<sup>5</sup> By 1905 there were 3,487 Mennonite Brethren in 59 congregations.<sup>6</sup> Numbers jumped significantly in the 1920s with the second large Mennonite emigration from Russia to North America of some 20,000, many of them Mennonite Brethren and all settling in Canada. The Mennonite Brethren became the second largest Mennonite group in Canada and the third largest in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

The first Mennonite Brethren immigrants were scattered and leaderless until the arrival in Kansas of Abraham Schellenberg, former elder of the Molotschna Rueckenau MB Church, in 1879. With his help the fledgling congregations were organized into a Conference or *Bund*. Two strategies for consolidating the Conference were annual joint meetings of church representatives and the practice, begun in Russia, of sending ministers on itinerant preaching missions to the congregations and to dispersed members. The potential of publishing as a connecting mechanism was soon recognized as well.

The *Zionsbote* was just one of a variety of German-language publications that sprang up soon after the Mennonites of the 1870s migration arrived in America in order to assist their adjustment to the new environment, connect them with one another across the states and provinces they occupied, and provide news of the Old World. Some, like the *Mennonitische Rundschau* (1880), were started as inter-Mennonite papers and covered a broad range of topics both spiritual and secular; some were regional in nature or agency-sponsored; others, like the *Christlicher Bundesbote* (1882) and the *Zionsbote* (1884) were produced by particular Conferences and were more sectarian in nature.

The *Zionsbote* was launched as a quarterly with John F. Harms acting as editor from his home.<sup>8</sup> By 1889 it appeared as a weekly with eight pages and after 1904 with 16 pages. It was published as a Conference paper to the end of 1964. (By 1937 MBs of North America also had an English publication, *The Christian Leader*.) The *Zionsbote* relied on its readers, usually members of MB churches, for content, though material was also “borrowed” from other periodicals when needed to fill the pages. Ministers contributed theological writings, members shared experiences or devotional thoughts or news, and “correspondents” sent regular reports from the congregations. The paper had an epistolary feel to it. While the *Zionsbote*’s purpose was to serve spiritual goals and communicate matters pertaining to church life,

other information was also communicated—health, weather, crops, visits, moves, deaths, weddings and births. Travel reports and conversion stories were popular topics. Until 1914 some 1,000 copies were also sent to Mennonite Brethren in Russia, thus providing a significant link within a religious group divided by migration. The paper changed over the 50 years under discussion, of course; its history cannot be traced here except to say that it improved in appearance and size, and also became somewhat more focused over time on religious, congregational, and denominational matters. It accepted that people's reading sources had increased and they were getting their "everyday" news elsewhere.

This research project assumes, without addressing it directly, a new kind of "imagined" community created by the newspaper medium itself.<sup>9</sup> It was not the spatial community of village or colony but one based on shared theological understandings and experiences as members of the *Bund*. As an in-group paper driven both by its individual members and its larger official sponsoring body, and containing both congregational and personal news, the *Zionsbote* provided a community experience apart from physical proximity. While further research would be needed to ascertain how much readers agreed with or were influenced by the paper, it is probably fair to say that the *Zionsbote* was a significant shaper of group culture. Because of its readers' common immigrant origins, voluntary commitment to the religious organization, the German language, the unique authority of a church-sponsored but reader-written paper, the importance of the church in the immigrant experience and the relevance of the paper's content to their daily lives, they formed a generally assenting "interpretive community". As one woman wrote, "In the *Zionsbote*, I feel at home."

The methodology of this study included reading selected issues of the paper across the 50-year period to gain impressions and references to the city. (Although the paper was founded in 1884, only the issues after 1890 are extant and microfilmed.) Using the Index created for the *Zionsbote*, I further identified articles that might comment on city or land issues. Travel reports were used to analyze images of the city gained through casual encounter. I read all the "Correspondence" emanating from Portland (Oregon), Winnipeg (Manitoba) and Vancouver (B.C.) for specific periods,<sup>10</sup> as well as some from other cities on a random basis in order to analyze views of the city by residents or mission workers. Mennonite Brethren histories provided context.

The findings of the research are organized into two parts. The first part describes religious images of city and attitudes about the city generally in the *Zionsbote*, as well as a few impressions of discourse relating to land. The second part describes images of the city as they emerge in three kinds of Mennonite Brethren urban experiences of the period: casual, mission, and residential encounters. Although studies of urbanization should define by size and characteristics what is understood by "urban", here in seeking "cities of the mind"<sup>11</sup> the territory is left deliberately somewhat nebulous. The word "*Stadt*" is used for both town and city in German, but in tracing encounters with the city I considered only those referring to large centers of population.

It must be said at the outset that the *Zionsbote* generally reflected the agrarian lifestyle of its writers and readers. This rurality was not particularly praised or defended, it was simply the group's predominant habit. Much biblical language is also agrarian-based. The language of spiritual sowing and reaping, drought and watering, the field, and so on in personal and church news enlarged the sense of the Mennonite Brethren mindset as a rural one.

But there are also biblical images of city. The periodical's name *Zionsbote*, meaning "messenger from Zion", carried the notion of city within it. Zion referred to a hill in Jerusalem given wider biblical meaning both as a holy city and metaphorically as God's chosen people. In New Testament usage it included the church and the heavenly city. After April 1904 the paper's masthead featured a sketch of a city, presumably Zion/Jerusalem: a walled, densely packed city of Near-Eastern appearance. Its appearance was surely meant to signal a place of spiritual refuge and intimacy, however, for it was a city of another time and region, not theirs in America. Mennonite Brethren used the word Zion to refer mainly to the religious community to which they belonged (as in "news out of Zion") and sometimes to the future heavenly gathering to which they were moving. Though heaven might occasionally be represented as a city of "golden streets" it was more often spoken of as "home above", "a better land", or simply "being with Jesus". John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* had been significant in editor Harms' life and was advertised and strongly recommended in the paper. That book's allegory begins and ends with a city: the pilgrim leaves the City of Destruction and reaches the Celestial City at the end of his journey. The conversion accounts I read did not use this imagery for their conversion experience, however, though MBs of the *Zionsbote*'s first generation usually referred to themselves as "pilgrims". The path taken by Bunyan's pilgrim, of course, wound through a mainly empty countryside, though it did pass through a Vanity Fair that had grown up alongside it.

The Bible also contains the notorious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the *Zionsbote* carried several articles based on texts about these cities. A sermon by elder Abram Schellenberg in the 7 May 1890 *Zionsbote* about Lot separating from his uncle Abraham to settle in the cities of the attractive plain, made the point that *being* rich is not as dangerous as *wanting* to be rich, and meandered on to the encouragement to "be what you are, not more and not less...then the Lord is near you." In 8 October 1913 Abraham D. Hamm used the text "Lot...pitched his tent toward Sodom" to write about choice. Abraham chose the hills "where he could have close fellowship with God; there, he was nearer to God." A 12 August 1931 article by H. Rausch on Genesis 19:22, where an angel urges Lot to flee Sodom before its destruction, spiritualized the text into a call to flee from sin to the "hill of Golgotha." While these writings did not use the texts to explicitly warn of the dangers of contemporary city life, they did link contentment, safety, salvation and God's presence to a country environment.

The minutes of the 1883 Conference meeting of Mennonite Brethren in Henderson, Nebraska, reveal that delegates discussed living in cities. They agreed that members could not be forbidden to move to the city, but should be warned of

the dangers of such a decision. These dangers were not elaborated in the records, nor was the matter recorded as a resolution.<sup>12</sup>

Was this suggestion to warn MBs pursued by the *Zionsbote* between 1890 and 1940? Not very strongly. There are few articles written directly against city life, none explicitly outlining urban dangers to members. In the 1 October 1890 issue, an article reprinted from *Landwirt* entitled “Youth on the Land” acknowledged that young people may compare “the monotony of the farmer’s life” unfavorably with the “ever-changing, amusing whirl” of city life. But this “joy of the city” is a “fantasy”, the author said; many young people return home to the farm disappointed by their urban experience. The case against the city was made on the basis of one’s position within production, and the relative independence it offered. The farmer is his own boss, whereas “most workers today are...servants of the machine.” As for the boredom of the admittedly long dull winter evenings in the country, the young farmer could overcome them by improving himself through reading or the writing of letters.

In 28 September 1898 the *Zionsbote* carried an article—“Difficulties in the City Mission”—by Walter Rauschenbusch, a leading proponent of Social Gospel, outlining five obstacles to church work in the city, each of them contrasted with rural life. In the city the church is not the central point of life, living conditions encroach on family life and church life, there is less neighborliness, people are not fixed in their residence, and the cost of city land is rising. The church clearly belonged in the city, but the city militated against its success.

One of the strongest statements came from John F. Harms, former editor and now assistant editor of the paper, in 22 September 1926:

The misfortune of the Western world is its urbanization — especially where the farmer class is more or less dependent on and completely influenced by the city. The girls and women dress city-ish [*stadtsch*]. The houses, vehicles and furnishings are city-ish. The consequences are that the hard farm work, and the self-denial and the subjection to work one cannot postpone which the farm requires, pushes the children from the farm into the city.

“There is no remedy,” Harms added immediately, expressing the sense of inevitability that he had often earlier expressed about the scattering of the immigrants to various parts of the western United States and Canada, “so get used to it.”

The link between the city and the “worldliness” against which the Christian was to strive was also implied in warnings against dance, theater, and women bobbing their hair and smoking.<sup>13</sup> At other times “worldliness” referred to clothing fashions, arrogance in education, wedding customs, marriage outside the MB church, cutting the beard, “love songs” and “ballgames and all kinds of sports with their heathenish screaming”, which might further penetrate the rural congregation.<sup>14</sup> Discussion of what worldliness really meant was often left rather vague, as in statements such as

the following made by A.W. Schellenberg, 24 October 1917: "The ship must be in the water, but not water in the ship. The soul lives in the world, but not world in the soul."

Before moving on to specific kinds of encounters with the city, something must be said about images of land. As already mentioned, the *Zionsbote* generally reflected the predominantly agrarian lifestyle of its readers. Correspondents typically covered five areas in their reports: church events and spiritual health of congregation; physical health of members; life passages such as marriages, death, and births; people's visits, moving in or out; and the weather and progress of crops. In the last category, the prices paid for various grains and for land might be noted, as well as comments on the quantity or quality of the harvest.

Weather was mentioned often. Although news of the weather might seem a mere convention, that is, a convenient way to open or end a report, it was often connected to field work or harvest, underlining a dependence on weather particular to life on the farm. People writing from the city mentioned the weather less, but when references to nature or weather entered their reports these evoked beauty or otherworldly or more nostalgic emotions rather than survival. J.B. Doerksen wrote from Winnipeg 27 November 1935, for example, of the cold and said they longed for the warm spring sun, which reminded him of "eternal heavenly spring." As the Mennonite Brethren migrated from one place to another in North America, weather was used to flag differences and even superiority, a kind of mild one-upmanship that probably veiled more serious regionalism developing within the Mennonite Brethren Conference.<sup>15</sup>

But if, as we shall see, there was a variety of images of the city in the *Zionsbote*, so too there was of the land. Attending day services or being home for pastoral visitation, or being able to engage in itinerant ministry, required the agrarian lifestyle. But there was urgency, ambition, and difficulty portrayed in the concept of land, and very little sentimentality. The first Mennonite Brethren immigrants of the 1870s were generally poor, and probably of the lower Mennonite classes.<sup>16</sup> Many of them may have owned little or perhaps no land in Russia. Since it was land that had differentiated status in the Old World, it was not surprising that they wanted land in the New World. "We're happy that we have our own piece of land, for, as the proverb says, one's own house and hearth is precious as gold," wrote Jacob P. Huebert, 5 February 1908, from Menno, Kansas. It was written of a Johann Wall Sr. of Borden, Saskatchewan, 4 April 1906 that "he had what he had always wanted: each child on his own land and all of them near him, not far apart."

Although many immigrants settled and established themselves, the correspondents' reports of people arriving and moving on again conveyed a mood of restlessness over land.<sup>17</sup> Families were large and land in original settlements soon became scarce or too expensive. The moving about was described as land "hunger" or land "fever", neither particularly positive words; there were also warnings about speculation and reports of settlements that failed; life on the land was extremely hard.

We shall see later that the city was frequently described as a place of

temptations. But the corollary of the land as a place free of temptation was often subverted in the *Zionsbote*. Franz Doerksen wrote 23 October 1935 how his wife, who was sick and very disheartened, had struggled with the temptation to swallow the rodent poison they kept under their bed. "[T]he Devil came before her with his bait...The battle was intense."

Minister Gerhard P. Regehr wrote 10 November 1926 of his travels to encourage Mennonite Brethren scattered about Michigan. He visited the Suderman family in Comins, a very small place at the end of the rail line. The Sudermans lived another seven miles further by car, reminding Regehr of the biblical Abraham living in Mamre "far from the noise of this world." Suderman, wrote Regehr, "was of the opinion that there were fewer temptations in the solitude than in more populated places. But he did not say that there were no temptations." Regehr immediately added a telling comment: he saw snakes on the Sudermans' farm.

We turn now to specific Mennonite Brethren encounters with the city as they were written about and read in the *Zionsbote*. (Each relates to a particular genre of the paper.) These can be considered as roughly chronological within MB history, although there is overlap in all of them. In the early years of the periodical most encounters with the city were of a casual nature. Cities were passed through and observed during the journey of migration or through other travels. In 1910 Mennonite Brethren opened their first city mission in Minneapolis, though they had been exploring such a project earlier. Other city missions followed in cities like Winnipeg and Los Angeles. During the same period reports appeared from Mennonite Brethren living in cities like Portland, Detroit, Milwaukee, Winnipeg and various urban sites in California. In the 1920s, due to the large influx of new MB immigrants into Canada, reports from cities like Vancouver, Medicine Hat, Saskatoon, and Lethbridge made their appearance.

The city of the migration journey was a place to mark off on the long journey from the Old Home to the New Home, a place that represented a stage in an often anxiety-filled passage, so like the pilgrimage they were all on between birth and death. The language of pilgrimage and journey forms the dominant motif of the *Zionsbote* in its first generation of existence; travel reports of all kinds filled its pages, people signed off as "your fellow pilgrim". The conventions of this travel writing required reporting the trip from one stop to the next, and so the cities took their place in the mental geography of the Mennonite world. Jacob Giesbrecht, for example, travelled from his home in Wohldemfurst, he reported 26 August 1891, over Ekatarinordar, Novorossisk, Odessa, Warsaw, Berlin, Bremen, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, to Hillsboro. To read such a report was to visualize a chain that linked the Mennonite Brethren of Wohldemfurst in Russia with their co-religionists in Hillsboro, Kansas. It was a chain of cities. Place names in Russia recalled the Old World to immigrants; place names in America established the MB geography of the New World.

The city also appeared in the many travel reports of itinerant ministry and in accounts of visits from America back to Russia, or from Russia to America, or within North America. These journeys, like migration travel, provided opportunity to look

at the city. The city was a place of wonder. It inspired awe and *Begeisterung* (enthusiasm). Abraham Welk wrote 17 May 1893 of his day spent in New York, just passing through: "I felt almost like the Queen of [Sheba] as she saw the wonders of Solomon with her own eyes and said, 'I have not been told the half of all your wisdom'."

David Harms' wrote 3 March 1909 of his visit to Edmonton:

Edmonton is a romantic city on the Saskatchewan River, with its evergreen covered banks, with also many coal mines and so many interesting things and sights that Brother Hodel, who was so kind and took me around and showed me everything, and I were completely tired by evening....Over and over again I had to think of the verse, Lord, how great and how many are your works. But the resourcefulness of man must also be greatly admired....

If the city aroused fear in these encounters it was not because it was evil, but rather because it was unknown and so much "more" than one was used to—bigger, faster, more modern. It provoked a sense of vulnerability. Jakob Buhler of Saskatchewan spent several weeks in Winnipeg while his wife was in the hospital. "In a city with so many people, all sorts of things happen" he wrote 24 January 1912, clearly somewhat overwhelmed. He listed them: a man riding the streetcar to visit his son suddenly fell over and was a corpse; another man, confined to the hospital, feared he would not get out and committed suicide; another man was run over in the busy thoroughfare of streetcars and vehicles and had his legs broken. "But the driving is fast here," Buhler said, "especially with the automobiles."

The act of writing about the city as observer both tamed the city and invited people to visit it. The writer acted as a companion, as it were, acknowledging his own strangeness in the city but by experience suggesting how one negotiated the unfamiliar city spaces. J. Sievers wrote in "Travel Impressions" 26 October 1892 of arriving at Union Depot in Chicago and landing "right in the middle of the whirl of the large city, which feels strange and uncomfortable for the person from the quiet land. At every street corner one has to hurry in order not to lose a limb, or even his life. There was such a chaos of people, wagons and cars...." Still, Sievers goes on to describe where they went and the church establishment where they stayed, closing his report by urging people to visit the World Exhibition in Chicago in the coming year, and to take at least a week for it. He had been reminded of heaven, "the city of golden streets", he said, in touring the buildings that were going up on the Exhibition site.

The city was a safe city, a good and even Christian city, when connections with fellow believers could be discovered or sites of particular interest to the group could be highlighted. This kind of access ranged from mentions of the German *Emigrantenhaus* in New York as a "place of protection and well-being," to finding fellow Christians—ideally other Mennonites, or at least Germans or Baptists—there by chance or arrangement, who acted as their guides and interpreters. When such connections were not found, the city might remain foreign to both writer and



reader. Hermann and Lena Rogalsky, for example, stopped to see the World Fair in Paris on their 1900 trip back to Russia to visit their parents. There were no words of amazement about the sights or the exhibitions, only their confusion as they stood in the rain outside the Paris train station like “soaked chickens”, trying in both German and English to get directions but rebuffed by indifferent Parisians.<sup>18</sup>

What one chose to see and then write about created understanding of cities around Mennonite Brethren interests. Johann Barkman wrote in 1913 that he had seen London’s three “most important” sights: Westminster Abbey, where one was reminded of Bunyan, Wesley, and Livingston; the British Bible Society, the world’s largest of its kind, with huge rooms containing Bibles in 450 languages; and the British Museum. Continuing on his journey through Bristol, he visited George Mueller’s orphanage of evangelical fame.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Mennonite Brethren might learn of Chicago as the site of conferences at Moody Church, or Minneapolis as the home of the Northwestern Bible Conference.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most frequent and perhaps most effective ways of bringing the unfamiliar city into MB experience was to link it, via print, to shared theological understandings. The William J. Ewert family, travelling from Russia to America in 1904, had an unexpected day’s wait in Moscow and climbed the 311 steps of the Kremlin tower. The view of “nearly the whole city” reminded them of “the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.”<sup>21</sup> The reminder could also be more ominous. Leon and Charlotte Baumbach, who visited the World’s Fair in San Francisco, wrote 12 January 1916 that they had greatly admired the beauty of that city and how it was “built up” but thought “someday, when the mighty Sovereign comes, it will all pass away.” Such religious comments may have, subconsciously, also served to justify travel or deflect criticism that such tours were frivolous or worldly.

The view in casual encounters is that of an observer—the tourist gaze—the city as an adjunct to the writer’s experience, a place of impressions that are received through one’s own knowledge and interests and experience or lack of it. As MBs got involved in city mission work, they might include a visit to their mission or those of other groups among the sights they went to see; these too provoked wonder, though it was at the “otherness” of degradation rather than grandeur. In either case, the city was worth a look; one need not turn away.

If the city of the casual encounter was a city to get through in migration, then to observe and discover in travelling, the city Mennonite Brethren encountered in mission was one to be confronted. It is these encounters that carry the *Zionsbote*’s most negative images of the city. The origins of the Mennonite Brethren as a revivalist movement had awakened interest in evangelizing others. This took several forms—foreign missions, a mission on an Indian reservation, and city missions. In the 27 November 1901 article “City Mission”, Johann W. Fast urged more interest in missionizing in cities. “Our Lord and his apostles did much in cities,” he said. He spoke of the “great need” of the cities and the necessity to respond to it.

There are scores of reports about the city missions in the *Zionsbote*, but detailed analysis of them is beyond the scope of this paper. Several images seemed to present themselves consistently, however, particularly from the first city mission of

the Mennonite Brethren, the South Side City Mission in Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>22</sup> This mission was an inner city work and served a poor and disadvantaged neighborhood. It was a place of “darkness”, “sinfulness”, “lusts and depravity”, and “temptations on all sides.” The staff worked with “the restless and perverse people of a big city.” Men were most likely to go to ruin there, and women and children were thus seen as particularly disadvantaged by city life, the most helpless; they were the focus of mission attention. A.A. and Susie Schmidt came into homes where children shivered in “lumpy beds.” Katharina Klassen told of being called to a home where a drunken man was beating his wife and pouring hot water over her while their six children cowered in fear.<sup>23</sup>

The physical properties of the mission and its environment were often described, as if to create a bulwark against human chaos; other buildings, however, contested the space, for saloons and amusement halls seemed to be on every corner. The needs were as big as the city itself, but the mission was only a “small light in the darkness” and “a drop of water in the desert.” At the same time, there was no doubt in the *Zionsbote* discourse about mission that the Church needed to be exactly there, in the heart of the city. “I always consider it a privilege,” wrote minister N.N. Hiebert, 22 September 1915, “that our Conference can help in this way.”

Language of pilgrimage was giving way at this time to a growing use of battle (*Kampf*) language in the *Zionsbote*.<sup>24</sup> Even if the battles in the city were protracted and seemed to yield little new ground, there was an understanding that this was the nature of the Christian life and that one engaged in it to the end. Missions staff were involved at the front on behalf of congregations who paid the bills. Long time mission workers A.A. and Susie Schmidt of Minneapolis often used most of their reports to thank “in the name of the poor” those who had sent letters and contributions. Their writings listed the names of Mennonite Brethren visitors to the mission, or contributing persons and churches, while the people they worked among usually remained nameless, being simply “our families” or “a boy/girl”. The ministers who reported on their visits to the city mission emphasized the dire situations the workers were up against; they saw themselves as emissaries to the front lines of the battle by bringing fresh supplies of energy. Despite the underlying tone of discouragement about the work, the reports communicated to readers that they, the MBs, were coming into and penetrating the anonymous darkness of the city.<sup>25</sup> They were doing what must be done; this was a city of great need which required their light and compassion, and they were willing to give it.

The Girls’ Homes sponsored by Mennonite Brethren in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Vancouver have been treated in depth in other studies, but must be mentioned here as constituting a significant part of *Zionsbote* discourse about the city. The encounter with the city that they represent lies somewhere between mission and the next category, residence. The images of the city they evoked also partook of both categories.

The Homes were founded to provide a center for young women of Mennonite Brethren families, often immigrants, who had come to the city to work as domestics.

The girls were generally in their teens, and the parents were understandably reluctant to let their daughters go. But family survival demanded all the assistance the children could render. The Homes offered a physical place of retreat for the girls on their Thursday afternoons and alternate Sunday evenings off. They also offered a re-configuration of home life. The matron looked out for the girls, helped them find employment and comforted them like a mother. Ministers of the church came to the Homes weekly to "serve" the servant girls with sermons and communion, fulfilling the role of spiritual leadership and guidance expected of fathers.

In describing the beginnings of the Girls' Home in Winnipeg, matron Anna Thiessen put all the recurring themes about these encounters with the city in one sentence. She had noticed, she said, "so many homeless girls here in the big city surrounded by so many temptations and in various dangers, the language and customs unfamiliar, going about with sad and despondent expressions." The city was large, tempting, dangerous, and strange. What characterized the girls was homelessness. Providing a home, then, was the key to success in the city.

In the 14 February 1906 *Zionsbote* an article, "The Danger for Young Men", told the story of a climber who, not wishing to be roped to the other climbers, untied himself and fell 300 feet. The author stated: "This illustrates the peril that young men in our cities are in. At home in the trusted family circle they are bound to father, mother, brother and sister. If they cast off this yoke, in order to enjoy more freedom, things usually start to go downhill." Here too city meant disjunction from family, or homelessness. If a home could be provided, as in the case of the Girl's Home, or if enough families could gather to form a congregation, the city could also become home. "The city knows no sympathy," Maria Kornelsen wrote 17 October 1928, "she does not treasure tears." At the Mary Martha Home, however, they could "cry their hearts out."

The Girls' Homes not only mirrored the homes Mennonite Brethren idealized, with maternal attentiveness, paternal leadership, and cooperative children, they also modeled the church family. The matron was called "sister", as were the girls. The ministers who came to serve them were "brothers", paralleling the usage of *Geschwister* in MB vocabulary as shorthand for fellow believers—"one of us."

What is striking about the reports about the Girls' Homes is the confidence that radiates from them. Whether written by one of the workers, a minister, or one of the "girls", they tended to cover the same ground, focusing less on the city than on the sweet and pathetic homelessness of the girls and their warm experiences in the Home provided for them. The stories were skillfully though sentimentally told, perhaps to stir readers whose contributions were needed to keep the Homes afloat. But they also conveyed that these residents learned the streetcar system and other lessons of the city; they were earning a living and they were having their spiritual and emotional needs met. A young Miss Reimer wrote how she had been working as a domestic on a farm in Saskatchewan but longed to go to Winnipeg instead, in spite of the additional travel expense because of the Girls' Home. She moved there and did not regret it, she said. She added: "My homesickness for my old homeland has become much smaller in Winnipeg. Why especially in Winnipeg, you ask?

There, because I could fellowship with God's children and had a home alongside my employment. Every person needs a place where she can say, 'here I am at home!'"

The third kind of encounter with the city written about and read in the *Zionsbote* was the city as residence. In examining "Correspondence" from Winnipeg between 1906 and 1919, Portland between 1891 and 1918, from Vancouver between 1924 and 1940, as well as from Detroit, Milwaukee and other cities, some observations can be made. One is that people rarely discussed their own employment in the city. Reports from the country conveyed agrarian activities through the weather, or through notes about crops or prices. In notes from Detroit one discovers that some people moved there to work in the automobile industry. From Portland it was revealed that the congregation's leader, Heinrich Reisbich, was a weaver in a woolen mill. A 29 May 1918 report from Portland reported growth in the congregation because some young people had moved in from California to work in the shipyards. Apart from these hints, however, the city portrayed in print by early MB residents seemed oddly empty of real daily activity. Did the writers assume city work—likely "working class" rather than professional at this time—outside the realm of MB interest? Mennonite Brethren living in the city also portrayed themselves as small, insignificant, and on the periphery of the main centers of church power. These descriptions accurately reflected their situation, of course, but the point is that this expresses something quite different than stereotypical discourse about city and country in which city people are viewed as sophisticated and rural people as "bumpkins."<sup>26</sup>

"We are just a few," wrote Bernhard Tilitzky from Winnipeg 2 May 1906. "We are so alone here and sometimes feel very lonely." Anna Tilitzky said on 6 May 1908, that they comforted themselves with the biblical promise that where "two or three" are gathered together, God is near. The Winnipeg reports, one after the other, were a litany of pleas for ministers—the "prominent [*grosse*] brothers"—to visit them. The small band in Winnipeg had an evangelical zeal for the people around them, but felt unable to attract many to their meetings. "People say, 'Yes, if you had a preacher, we would join you'", wrote A. Pauli, 12 October 1912, "but they don't want to hear God's word from us poor street-sweepers." The Winnipeg group gained significantly in courage (as did the reports in cheer) when in 1913 the Conference established Winnipeg as a "field" and sent them a minister, William J. Bestvater, a man who spoke "clearly and well."<sup>27</sup>

The image of the city as portrayed by residents was not one of danger or evil but of dependency and deficiency. Johannes Bauer of Milwaukee, writing of his daughter's death, said he had to give the funeral oration himself because their small group did not have a preacher.<sup>28</sup> The ministry of visiting preachers A. Schellenberg and P.C. Hiebert had been too short, Heinrich Reisbich of Portland commented 6 July 1904, and further reduced because it had to be confined to evenings. "It's difficult during the day," he said, "because all the brothers are at work." The same factor limited Reisbich's leadership. "I have to make my living weaving rugs," he said 24 May, 1905, "and have to be there punctually and then to serve the congregation yet too, that's hard." Preachers who were farmers, however, had times

of the year when they were relatively free to do local or itinerant church work.

When city residents wrote in this period it was with a respectful eye toward the country, to the larger Mennonite Brethren centers where the best ministers lived and authority seemed to reside.<sup>29</sup> There was an awareness of being at the edge of the predominantly agrarian life of the majority. Anna Tilitzky wrote, 24 November 1909 about the Thanksgiving service the Winnipeg group held in Peter Ewert's house. "Even though we're not farmers here, we still feel thankful," she said, as if the harvest festival belonged particularly to food producers, "for if the Lord didn't bless our farmers so richly we in the city would not have much." The reports from Vancouver considered for this study convey a similar tone of subtle deference or neediness, as befit their relative proportions, toward the larger agrarian body from which they were separated. But the messages were mixed. In one report a Vancouver correspondent might say, as H.P. Neufeld did 24 April 1940 that they did not begrudge one family's return to their farm in Yarrow after four years, for that might be "better for all of us;" but in another report on 7 June 1939 he had said that "there's still lots of room in the city." Again in 24 July 1940 he extended an invitation to the city and their fellowship, commenting that unfortunately the difficulty of finding employment there was a hindrance.

If city dwellers emphasized their smallness and neediness, those in the country sensed a different dynamic, however. The city seemed to be a magnet, pulling people in, and then, once there, scattering them some more. Minister J.H. Voth wrote on 10 November 1926, after a preaching trip to Mennonite Brethren in Michigan:

On my many travels, I am finding there is a noticeable, powerful strong pull toward the cities. Many of our young sisters and brothers, and children of our sisters and brothers, are being dispersed and lost to our Church... We must try energetically to go after them and find some point of contact with them, that they remain with us... we are losing our own brothers and sisters all over in Detroit, Lansing, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis and other places where they are scattered, those with whom one should stay in touch.

"[O]ur people have run off in all four directions," *Zionsbote* editor J.F. Harms had lamented in 15 September 1897 about the scattering of the immigrants. The dispersion on the frontier that had beset Mennonite Brethren in those early years as immigrants was now being repeated by those streaming to cities. "There's a multitude of our brothers and sisters living here in Chicago," said M.H. and Martha Schlichting 15 December 1923, "but they're dispersed over the entire city." The concern was pastoral, however, not anti-urban.

Those drawn in by the magnet of the city (or pushed there by economic necessity), though often pleading for ministerial help from the Mennonite Brethren, did not find the city bereft of spiritual resources. "In the large city there are so many churches," wrote J.A. Bauer from Milwaukee, 21 July 1926. They were only a small group of Mennonite Brethren, he reported, but one could visit the Mormons, the

“earnest *Bibelforscher*”, the Pentecostals, the Baptists, or a Russian group. If there were many temptations in the city, he seemed to suggest, there were also many religious opportunities.

The reports from Winnipeg, Portland, and Los Angeles refer to the sharing of buildings, services, and ministers with congregations of other denominations. The city, like the earlier frontier, exposed Mennonite Brethren to other Christian groups and new and compelling religious ideas. Although some people moving to the cities may have been “lost” to the faith, it is likely that many others were simply drawn into other groups and only “lost” to the Mennonite Brethren ethnic/theological community and have thus fallen from the Mennonite urbanization statistics.

In conclusion, it is clear that there was no single image of the city as evil (or the land as good) in *Zionsbote* discourse between 1890 and 1940. There were many images of both. The city was a place of wonder, discovery, Christianity, danger, darkness, battle, coldness, homey warmth, dispersion and irresistible enticement. It could be celestial or earthly. It was a place representing the highest human achievement or utter degradation, a place of power or a site of need. The city was a place to observe, confront, domesticate. Sam Bass Warner Jr. in “Slums and Skyscrapers: Urban Images, Symbols, and Ideology” compares the commonly held, yet contradictory nineteenth-century images of the city as either “streets paved with gold” or a “snare and destroyer of youth”, and confesses he doesn’t know how people “traffic” between the two sets of images. The same puzzle attends us as we see the many ways in which city was written and read in the *Zionsbote*.<sup>30</sup>

We have noted too that the concept of land was multi-faceted. It seemed to embrace security but also disappointment and insecurity. It seemed to be a necessity and a habit, but the attachment to this imperative had to be taken lightly as one place after another might be abandoned because of crop failure or as better opportunities arose elsewhere. It offered a certain refuge away from the “world” but like the garden of Eden was never without its temptations and suffering.

The experience of migration itself loosened its participants from the notion that one place took primacy over another. MBs on both sides of the Atlantic often reassured each other through the *Zionsbote* that whether “here” or “there” they were one in spirit and would someday be together again. Editor John F. Harms’ conclusion to a long report about his exploratory trip to Texas in 1897 expressed this broader, looser view of place: “During my two week journey in Texas, the thought often came to me that every place on earth, after all, can be turned into a pleasant earthly home through diligence and contentment, which shouldn’t be surprising either, when one remembers that all the earth is the Lord’s.”

Does the discourse in the *Zionsbote* confirm Richard Kyle’s contention about Mennonite Brethren that “they believed that Scripture elevates the rural values while deprecating the city as a place of sin?” These views were certainly expressed, but they were far from exclusively articulated in the periodical. Both the multiplicity of images and their existence side by side raise a sense of ambivalence about the city in the *Zionsbote*. Ambivalence may reflect anxiety or acceptance, or both.

The texts of the *Zionsbote* were often written in such a way that the narrative

jumped back and forth between human (earthly) experience and religious truth. They sometimes seemed parallel tracks that could not be wholly integrated, though kept in sight of one another by cross-referencing, allusions, or reminders. When, for example, A.P. Wall saw the newly-constructed Corn Palace on his way to the Mennonite Brethren annual conference in Dakota, 18 November 1891, he said it reminded him of their Christian task to build Zion. Whether it was the departure of a train, swimming in a river, or the unexpected arrival of guests, these experiences all reminded the writers of religious truth. At the same time, Scriptural allusions or texts might be referenced for ideas or emotions the writer wanted to communicate. This kind of shorthand was easily understood because the members of the community understood the same "language".

This cross-referencing style may have enabled Mennonite Brethren to acculturate to societal practices in many areas of their lives, especially to technology and to political and educational life, without apparent damage to their theological understandings. But images from both sources may play against each other in the same account. One example comes from the report of a trip Peter Regier and Johann Foth made through Oregon and California in 1902. The two ministers were on assignment from the Conference, looking up Mennonite Brethren in various communities as well as enjoying the sights along the way. They commented on both city and country, remarking for example that Denver was a large city with many factories, where many workers could earn good wages "and get ahead." In California, where Mennonite Brethren were moving into Los Angeles as well as some of the still-rural parts of California, they noted that the Sacramento Valley "still has room for many industrious hands." On one of their searches for some "brothers and sisters" there, they unexpectedly met the son of Peter Wall of Los Angeles. "It reminded us of Lot," said the report, "who, when the angels came to him, went out to meet them and invited them to come home with him." On the one hand, the article advertised the promise of cities and the "boom" state of California. On the other hand, the ministers, as representatives of the church, were linked to the angels who had urged Lot to flee the city. Would the reader have understood this report as an invitation or a warning?

Consider as a concluding example for this study one more *Zionsbote* text. It contains several images of the city as well as reflecting strategies for living there. The 19 April 1905 issue contained a report minister Johann Harms wrote about a trip he made to Oregon and California to visit the "scattered brothers and sisters and souls who stand near to us". In Los Angeles the Walls' family sent their daughter Sarah to meet him at the train station and show him the streetcar to take to their house. "A traveler is very thankful," he said, "for such friendliness in such a large city, where one knows no one else." Harms praised the scents of the blossoms and the climate; he called the place a "paradise". He visited a Schmidt family, he reported, saying Mr. Schmidt worked as a carpenter, earning \$ 3.60 a day; there were contracts and work available, he said. The Walls and their sons who worked in various factories "for very good wages" were also doing well; they were also faring well spiritually. In Anaheim, Harms preached in a Baptist church and in the evening he

*Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Enns-Rempel, "Urbanization of California Mennonites," Paul Toews, ed., *Bridging Troubled Waters: The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1995), 213.

<sup>13</sup> *Zionsbote*, Dance and theater: "Sind Tanz und Theaterbesuch einem Christen erlaubt" 20 August 1890 and "Der Christ und das Theater" 15 January 1890. Bobbed hair and smoking: "Gegen Verweltlichung" 26 May 1926.

<sup>14</sup> *Zionsbote*, Clothing, education and wedding customs: 22 May 1895. Marriage: 6 October 1897, 1 June 1898, 10 August 1898. Beard: "Weltgleichstellung" 13 January 1909. Songs: "I'erschiedenes" 26 September 1926. Sports: "Die Lust der Welt, eine grosse Gefahr fuer die Gemeinde" 29 May 1935.

<sup>15</sup> The ongoing shifts in the distribution of members led to tensions between the regions and to the eventual formation of District Conferences with its accompanying decentralization. John A. Toews, op. cit., 202, 205.

Weather talk, ubiquitous in the *Zionsbote*, suggests a counterpoint to traditional thinking about the division of city and land, for if it separates the vocabulary of city and country it also introduces a seemingly harmless but persistent regional difference into the discourse. It suggests that Mennonite Brethren were becoming aware of themselves as upon a vast landscape: not tucked together in pretty villages in one corner of the world, but spread out at great distances and subject to the vagaries of each place. It is an elemental "nature" as in climate that most asserts itself.

<sup>16</sup> Peter J. Klassen, "The Historiography of the Birth of the Mennonite Brethren," in *P.M. Friesen and His History* (Center for M.B. Studies, 1979).

<sup>17</sup> The language mirrored the facts. Of 168 congregations begun between 1874 and 1960, 44 percent did not survive, showing "the rapid changes and turmoil involved in new settlements on the frontier." Calvin Redekop, "Mennonite Brethren Economic Developments in the United States" in Paul Toews, ed., *Bridging Troubled Waters: The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century*, (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1995), 120-122). See, for example, the movement of Mennonite Brethren connected with the congregation at Kirk, Colorado, which could be constructed from *Zionsbote* reports but is summarized in John F. Harms, *Geschichte der Mennoniten Brudergemeinde* (Hillsboro, KS., 1924), 92-5, 98-100.

<sup>18</sup> Bernhard Pauls, *Zionsbote*, 19 November 1890. The "Immigrantheus" was apparently a German-language establishment near the harbour. Rogalsky, *Zionsbote*, 22 August 1900.

<sup>19</sup> Johann Barkmann, *Zionsbote*, 26 November 1890 and next two issues.

<sup>20</sup> Conference in Chicago reported by J.C. Thiessen, *Zionsbote*, 11 March 1914. Conference in Minnesota reported by William J. Bestvater, *Zionsbote*, 20 September 1916.

<sup>21</sup> *Zionsbote*, 13 April 1904.

<sup>22</sup> The images of city as seen through the lens of the Winnipeg mission do not seem quite as stark or their tone as discouraged. Similar pictures of poverty, need and "many temptations" were drawn, but the more moderate tone may be a result of working among German-speaking immigrants and later Russian Mennonite immigrants in the mission. But this needs to be investigated further.

<sup>23</sup> A.A. & Susie Schmidt, "Aus der Stadtmission", *Zionsbote*, 18 October 1911; N.N. Hiebert, "Ein Besuch in der Stadtmission," *Zionsbote*, March 1915 and 22 September 1915; Katharina Klassen, "Aus der Stadtmission", *Zionsbote*, 17 January 1917.

<sup>24</sup> The motif of battle continued into the 1920s and 30s; battle language may have been influenced by World War I, but was more likely connected to Fundamentalist-Modernist theological controversies of the period.

<sup>25</sup> A.A. & Susie Schmidt, "Stadtmission," *Zionsbote*, 27 January 1927.

<sup>26</sup> That the Mennonite Brethren were well aware of such general perceptions is revealed by



a short piece about Atlantic City (no author given, probably the editor), 2 September 1908. The piece commends the city's mayor for trying to enforce Sabbath laws. "At the beginning people made fun of him, calling him an old country uncle from some hidden crow's nest, who had no understanding of city ways..."

<sup>27</sup> Winnipeg report, *Zionsbote*, 15 April 1914.

<sup>28</sup> "Aus Eurer Werkstube," *Zionsbote*, 21 April 1926.

<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that similar pleas for visits, similar awareness of being "two or three together", similar gratitude for every visit from the "outside" was expressed by small rural clusters of Mennonite Brethren. This attitude may be a function of size as much as location.

<sup>30</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr., "Slums and Skyscrapers: Urban Images, Symbols and Ideology," in Lloyd Rodwin and Robert M. Hollister, eds., *Cities of the Mind: Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984), 181.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Randall Miller and Thomas Muzak, *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), 26.