

# Russian Mennonite Immigrants of the 1920s: A Reappraisal

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Various strands of Mennonite history, most notably early Anabaptism, have come under critical scrutiny in recent years. As a consequence of this more extensive study and more intensive analysis, our historical self-understanding has been broadened in scope and detail and some earlier assumptions and conclusions have necessarily been revised. David G. Rempel has observed that

Unwarranted conclusions, unfortunately, too often lead to the creation of myths, later incorporated into historical accounts as established facts. Russian Mennonite historiography has more than its share of myths.<sup>1</sup>

The task of ongoing scholarship is to evaluate and, if necessary, to exorcise these inaccuracies. The fledgling field of North American Mennonite studies, despite its relative newness, can only benefit from such a reappraisal. This paper examines briefly five aspects of the Canadian Mennonite experience as illustrated by those immigrants from Soviet Russia who settled in Ontario after World War I. On the basis of that case study, it is argued that a number of basic assumptions about the Russian Mennonites require a thorough reassessment.

The first question focuses on one aspect of the immigration process itself. More specifically, what was the role and significance of the so-called "Mennonite lobby" in securing the admission of some 20,000 Russian refugees into Canada between 1923 and 1930? Several Mennonite scholars, most notably Frank Epp, have traced the broad outlines of this story elsewhere. All follow the same line of argument. Their explanations require a reevaluation, however, because they appear to write, in this instance at least, first of all as Mennonites and only secondarily as representatives of their discipline.

C. Henry Smith set the stage for the almost mythical proportions this event would attain when, in 1941, he depicted it as "an epic in

Mennonite annals almost unsurpassed anywhere in all history."<sup>2</sup> The enormity of the achievement notwithstanding, Smith's explanation for it, like the description, is over-simplified and over-stated. He credits the Liberal Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, for removing the obstacles to Mennonite immigration and ensuring that "the door was thrown wide open for the admission of the Russian Mennonites."<sup>3</sup> Neither assertion is entirely accurate. To what extent Smith reflected the popular perception of this incident among the Mennonites, however, is another matter.

Some twenty years later, Frank Epp broadened and corrected this account somewhat in *Mennonite Exodus*. Here, as in the first volume of *Mennonites in Canada*, details are scanty and the explanation traditional. "[King's] benevolence," Epp maintains, "coupled with the determination of the Mennonites, eventually succeeded in opening the Canadian door."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Epp writes that the Prime Minister, "responding to a Mennonite 'lobby,' had the order [barring Mennonite immigration, order in council P.C. 1204] revoked."<sup>5</sup> Political scientist John H. Redekop follows Epp in ascribing the lifting of the ban on Mennonite immigration to "extensive lobbying on the part of many Mennonites."<sup>6</sup> In none of these cases is the political, social, and economic climate of Canada given adequate consideration. Consequently, the explanation for the subsequent closing of the Canadian immigration door to thousands of desperate Mennonites in Moscow in 1929 becomes equally superficial and incomplete. What had become of the benevolence of Mackenzie King in the interim? Why did this supposed lobby fail only seven years after its alleged triumph? Clearly there were in Canada, both immediately after World War I and again in 1929, other factors which ultimately determined the fate of the Russian Mennonites.

A more complete and more accurate explanation for the admission of Russian Mennonites into Canada after 1922 must take into account such factors as the decline in wartime hostilities against immigrant aliens in general and conscientious objectors in particular, the emigration of Old Colony Mennonites, the widespread demand for more immigrants, particularly farmers, the commendable reputation of Mennonite farmers, and a government policy restricting European immigration to bona fide farmers, farm labourers, and female domestic servants.<sup>7</sup> Equally important were the three guarantees the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization made to the federal government to secure the admission of the Russian Mennonites, namely that the newcomers would be accommodated and cared for by their coreligionists upon arrival, that they would settle on the land as farmers, and that none would become a public charge for five years.<sup>8</sup> These guarantees permitted the government to freely grant the only concessions it made to the Mennonites, that is, their exemption from normal passport, continuous journey, and monetary

requirements. Without this propitious coincidence of circumstances and without those guarantees, few if any Russian Mennonites would have been admitted to Canada regardless of the benevolence of the Prime Minister or the determined lobbying efforts of a number of Mennonite leaders.

By 1929, however, these circumstances had changed considerably. The combined economic, political, and social forces militating against continued large-scale immigration in general and a renewed influx of Mennonites in particular convinced Mackenzie King that any action on the Mennonite request would "raise a serious problem here."<sup>9</sup> This tragic failure clearly exposed the ineffectiveness of the friendly coalition between the Liberal party and Canadian Mennonites. It also suggests something about the changing nature of the Mennonite community in Canada during that period, as will become evident.

A second question in need of further study centres on the relationship between the Russian Mennonite immigrants and their Anglo-Canadian hosts. Apart from unusual circumstances such as those occasioned by a wartime atmosphere, and aside from the unfortunate experience of their Old Colony coreligionists, the Russian Mennonites prided themselves in their easy acceptance into the mainstream of Canadian society. They were anxious to differentiate themselves publicly from the negative image of their Old Colony brethren and from other eastern Europeans whose admission the public and the politicians generally opposed.<sup>10</sup> Aware of the anxieties and even hostilities surrounding their admission, the Mennonites pledged themselves fully to becoming "Canadians worthy of the name."<sup>11</sup> In the process, they tended to forget that they remained, nonetheless, immigrants and aliens. They naively expected, therefore, to be spared the barbs of nativistic hostility encountered by many other New Canadians.<sup>12</sup> The reception accorded them upon arrival may have contributed to that illusion.

Frank Epp contends that almost all of the wartime resentment against the Mennonites had dissipated by 1923. As evidence of this sweeping generalization, he reports how prominent non-Mennonites and even former soldiers stood in tears as they observed the arrival of the first trainload of immigrants in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. "The same was true in succeeding years," Epp maintains, "and until 1928 almost no opposition was heard from Anglo-Saxon Canadians."<sup>13</sup>

Those who settled in Manitoba received a similarly warm welcome. The *Manitoba Free Press*, which had angrily denounced the Mennonites for their refusal to bear arms during the war, reflected the extent to which public opinion had changed by 1924. In a story outlining their recent settlement, the paper emphasized that the newcomers were farmers, that

they belonged to the "progressive branch" and not the Old Colony, and continued:

The Mennonites now arriving in Canada are not communists, they are anxious to learn English, send their children to public schools and give promise of becoming real Canadian citizens.<sup>14</sup>

In Kitchener-Waterloo, meanwhile, the *Daily Record* assured its readers that the newcomers of July 19, 1924 bore "not the slightest resemblances of squalor or dirt which is usually associated with European immigrants."<sup>15</sup> Like their Swiss-German coreligionists, who, according to this paper, ranked among "the finest of citizens" in the region, these Mennonites intended to settle on the land. It was assumed, therefore, that they would not compete for jobs with native Canadians as Italian and Slavic immigrants did. In light of these factors, the *Daily Record* concluded that "As a body the new arrivals leave little to be desired."<sup>16</sup>

Unchallenged, these early accolades have gained mythical proportions. Upon closer scrutiny, however, these accounts appear highly selective. The public euphoria had, in Ontario at least, disappeared long before the economic slump of 1928, the watershed suggested by Frank Epp. The Russian Mennonite settlers here demonstrated a marked tendency to gravitate toward towns and cities.<sup>17</sup> To native Canadians, this trend represented a blatant betrayal of both their general expectations of these immigrants and of the specific pledge to settle on the land. One immigrant recalls that "Any man who went to town and got a job . . . was looked on as . . . a traitor . . . because we promised to work on the land."<sup>18</sup> The issue became so contentious for organized labour that it emerged in the 1926 federal election campaign.<sup>19</sup> Workers saw their jobs being taken by immigrants willing to accept lower wages in order to secure employment. One of those newcomers recalls that "many foreigners . . . used to go to the hiring man and say, 'I'll work for fifteen cents.' Just to get started."<sup>20</sup>

Nativistic overtones soon punctuated public reaction. One resident wrote to mayor Ratz in December, 1927, to protest "the foreign element flocking into Kitchener."

I am another one that thinks it is about high time something is done. If the Canadians would all stick together and boycott some of those firms that employ these Germans, etc. and let the Canadians go home, they would see where they would be at . . . They came out here to go on the farm and then get into the shops and they are all set. We had to fight the Germans, etc. in the war, and so why make a soft living for them now in this country, the land of milk and honey for them, but not for us anymore since they started in.<sup>21</sup>

According to the mayor, "This [sort of letter] is getting to be a daily occurrence . . . It's as regular as the daily dozen."<sup>22</sup> He promised to alert

federal officials to the situation.<sup>23</sup> Bishop Jacob H. Janzen of Waterloo reported in early 1927 that the situation had become so volatile that residents began to "stop our people on the street and threaten to make trouble . . ." <sup>24</sup>

Alarmed by these incidents, Mennonite leaders pleaded with their people to return to farming. They recognized that the situation could, according to a report in the immigrant press,

become disastrous, not only for all immigrants, but for us Mennonites in particular. We have good reason to fear the latter, for we have been seriously warned repeatedly by the authorities not to bring any more of our brethren into the cities.<sup>25</sup>

David Toews, chairman of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, confided to B. B. Wiens, an immigrant leader in Ontario, that "the situation is more serious than most of our people think."<sup>26</sup> Wiens, in turn, told alarmed delegates to the annual national immigrant conference in 1927 that "very few had any idea of how close we were to being resettled."<sup>27</sup>

These attitudes bore bitter fruit two years later when thousands of Mennonites stormed Moscow with the hope of emigration to Canada. B. B. Wiens conceded that he found no sympathy for such a movement among Canadian workers.

A certain nervousness is evident when one broaches the subject with them. If you tell them that the Mennonites in question will go onto the farms, they counter: "What did you promise and where are you now?" If one tries to calm them by pointing to the prospect that these Russians will be sent to the West, they answer — "and after 24 hours they will be in Waterloo-Kitchener." They are not completely wrong, and if they had to decide — no Mennonite would set foot on Canadian soil. If one really thinks about it, the workers can't be blamed because we did not justify the faith placed in us, and the government, the C.P.R. and the people believe themselves to be disappointed in their expectations.<sup>28</sup>

Tragically, this closed Canadian door sealed the fate of most of those encamped at the gates of Moscow in 1929.

The case of Ontario indicates clearly that all was not well between immigrant Mennonites and their Canadian hosts and that the Mennonites themselves bore some responsibility for the hostilities which arose and which became evident well before 1928. More detailed study of the western Canadian experience might prompt a further revision of our understanding of the nature of the relationship between Mennonite immigrants and the host society.

The Ontario experience also raises questions about the settlement patterns of Russian Mennonite immigrants. Popular conception, sup-

ported by the small amount of literature available on the subject, holds that Mennonite urbanization is a post-World War II phenomenon, accelerated if not initiated by industrial expansion during the war. Cornelius Krahn has located this watershed somewhat earlier. He suggests that, for Canada at least, the Great Depression played a significant role in "opening the gate to the city."<sup>30</sup> Both arguments, however, assume for all North American Mennonites a mind-set and a heritage almost exclusively rural which was shattered by overwhelming and irreversible economic factors. These assumptions require a reappraisal.

First of all, this discussion needs clearer definitions and firmer categories. For example, the statistics must be broken down to distinguish between the so-called *Russlaender* (immigrants of the 1920s) and the *Kanadier* (1870s immigrants) in western Canada and between the Russian minority and the Swiss-German majority in Ontario. There are, invariably, significant differences between these groups. Even such refined statistics, moreover, need to be interpreted in the light of prevailing values, for statistics measure actions which may, by reason of compulsion and not volition, depart in one direction or another from prevailing attitudes. The immigrants of the 1920's for example, were all compelled to begin their life in Canada on the farm, regardless of their occupation in Russia. Many, however, were artisans, small businessmen, or educated professionals uninterested in agrarian pursuits.

Another glaring weakness in the study of Mennonite urbanization in Canada is its focus on large cities such as Toronto, Ottawa, and especially Winnipeg. This preoccupation ignores the large non-farming element resident in smaller towns and cities. In the open society characteristic of Canada both town and country dwellers could not long remain immune to urban influences. Secondly, therefore, this discussion would benefit greatly from studies of the particular and the unique. The case of Ontario is instructive.

Like all other Russian Mennonite immigrants, those who arrived in Ontario in 1924 did so under the agreement between the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC) and the Canadian government noted earlier which guaranteed that, among other things, they would settle on the land as farmers. Barely three months after their arrival, however, Bishop S. F. Coffman of Vineland, a prominent (Old) Mennonite Church leader in Ontario who played an active role in facilitating the movement, noted a tendency to forsake the farms and seek employment in local factories. ". . . [S]ome people feel that they are free to do as they please on this matter," he lamented to David Toews, CMBC chairman.<sup>31</sup> In the spring of 1927 Toews himself reported that about one quarter of the immigrants, by now numbering some 17,000, were no longer on the land.<sup>32</sup> In Ontario, however, where some 1,700 of these newcomers had

settled by that time, this figure was well over one third.<sup>33</sup> In fact, by January 1929, even before the onset of the Depression, it was estimated that fully one half of the Russian Mennonites in this province had forsaken the farm.<sup>34</sup> The 1931 census figures indicate that, during the depth of the Depression, about 40% of this group qualified as urban residents.<sup>35</sup>

The same census classified only 21.5% of all Ontario Mennonites as urban dwellers, compared with 13.7% of all Saskatchewan Mennonites and 9.3% of all Manitoba Mennonites.<sup>36</sup> The national average for all Mennonites, therefore, was a mere 12.9%, or one third of the percentage for Russian Mennonites in Ontario. (Hence the caution regarding the use of statistics.) The only appreciable change in these percentages during the next decade, the decade of depression, occurred, significantly, in Ontario where the proportion of urban dwellers among Mennonites increased from 21.5% to 24% according to census data.<sup>37</sup> Apparently factors other than and prior to the Great Depression must be sought to account for the pre-World War II urbanization of the Canadian Mennonites, particularly of the 1920s immigrants.

This pronounced tendency to forsake the farmlands of Ontario presented, even at the time, a problem for proponents of another Mennonite myth. B. B. Wiens, a prominent immigrant leader and organizer in Ontario, depicted agriculture as the "*angeborener Beruf*" (inborn calling) of the Mennonites.<sup>38</sup> "We are neither towns people nor, by profession, factory workers but rather farmers," he asserted.<sup>39</sup> All the while, paradoxically, he continued to live and work in the city of Waterloo! Bishop Jacob H. Janzen, organizer and spiritual father of the United Mennonites, agreed that Mennonites did not belong in urban centres. "Our people *must* leave the cities if they are not to be lost in them," he maintained. ". . . [O]nly settlement on the land can save us."<sup>40</sup> The Russian Mennonite identity (*Eigenart*), he contended, consisted of a unique religious faith and a German cultural heritage set in a rural milieu. "That was our ideal from the very beginning," he insisted, "and has remained such."<sup>41</sup> The reality in Ontario, however, soon consigned his ideal to the realm of myth.

The factors which contributed to these seemingly uncharacteristic developments in Ontario require further investigation and analysis. Despite their high religious and cultural ideals, material forces apparently affected these Mennonite immigrants as noticeably as they did other newcomers. While this may not appear to be significant at first glance, it calls into question the power and pervasiveness, if not the very existence, of a predominant rural and agrarian *Weltanschauung* among the Mennonites in Russia by the advent of World War I. Where did the values exhibited by these newcomers originate? B. B. Wiens conceded that the later immigrants to Ontario, those who followed the 1924 group, had

already decided beforehand to settle in the cities.<sup>42</sup> For them, and many others in Ontario, towns with a population of several thousand seemed conducive to their experiences and expectations. Even larger centres like Kitchener-Waterloo, with a combined population of almost 40,000 in 1931, could not intimidate them. Perhaps even the very nature of the fabled Russian Mennonite "commonwealth" bears a closer examination in view of the independent attitudes and cosmopolitan preferences exhibited by these offspring of that social order.<sup>43</sup>

Sociologist Leo Driedger has argued that "As much as possible, the Mennonite canopy was transferred from Russia to Canada."<sup>44</sup> That may have been true on the western prairies. But in Ontario, neither philosophical, emotional nor even theological appeals to the ideals of the closed, separated, and self-regulating society of the "commonwealth" evoked much response. Immigrant leaders urged their people "to unite around a great, idealistic goal once again" and to overcome material forces with spiritual resources.<sup>45</sup> These exhortations and admonitions, however, had little impact. The only notable exception was the ill-fated attempt to reconstruct a Mennonite community on the tree-covered homesteads of Northern Ontario. By and large, however, the Russian Mennonite immigrants in Ontario soon recognized and readily accepted the inevitability of their virtually unrestricted exposure to and participation in the cultural, economic, educational, social, and political life of English-Canadian society.

The Ontario experience, therefore, also calls into question the supposed separatist mentality of the immigrant Mennonites. Frank Epp's first volume of *Mennonites in Canada*, subtitled "The History of a Separate People," admittedly does not cover the time period under discussion here. This idea has, however, been applied more broadly. Its applicability to the Russian Mennonite "commonwealth," moreover, has not been seriously challenged. David G. Rempel, in delineating this concept, pointed out not only the virtual autonomy and self-sufficiency of the Mennonite colonies but also "the Mennonites' historic tradition of cohesiveness and 'Absonderung' (avoidance) from association with other people not of their faith . . ." For these reasons, he concludes, "the Mennonite settlements in Russia constituted, for all intents and purposes, a state within a state, or a Mennonite Commonwealth."<sup>46</sup>

What evidence is there within the immigrant communities in Canada, however, to suggest that this propensity was still common among the Mennonites, that it was somehow unique to them, and this because it grew out of their theology? While the devastating impact of the collapse of that social order and the virtual impossibility of its reestablishment in Canada are self-evident, what is less clear is that its inhabitants just prior to World War I uniformly subscribed to or collectively agreed upon a

common and traditional set of Mennonite values. That they were inherently an "ackerbautreibendes Volk" (agrarian people),<sup>47</sup> as some asserted, did not become apparent in Canada. What, then, of the ideal of settlement in separate, self-contained communities? How integral was this tendency to their self-understanding and *Eigenart* (unique identifying characteristics)?

For a brief period after their arrival, some immigrants articulated this hope and advocated its realization. "Where," asked Bishop Jacob H. Janzen, "can we settle together in groups, establish and build our churches and bring our schools under our influence . . .?"<sup>48</sup> The homesteads of northern Ontario could, he believed, provide that setting. In fact, in order to encourage Mennonite settlement here, the provincial government agreed to reserve homesteads bordering those occupied by the immigrants for the exclusive use of their coreligionists. "This is very good," one settler explained, "for it permits the possibility of closed settlement and the exclusion of other nationalities. In time, a colony could be built here after our own wishes."<sup>49</sup> According to B. B. Wiens the residents of this settlement could cultivate and perpetuate "the true Mennonite spirit."<sup>50</sup> So determined were these settlers to reestablish the former social order that they reinstated the religious and civic structure typical of their Russian villages. But how representative and how resolute was this group? To what extent did they embody "the true Mennonite spirit"? Indeed, what was the true Mennonite spirit?

There is no evidence to suggest that this movement constituted more than the fleeting dream of a dedicated few. Despite laudatory articles in the Mennonite press, at no time did the population of Reesor, as the settlement was called, reach much beyond 250.<sup>51</sup> Even many of these moved north largely for economic rather than religious, cultural, or idealistic reasons. When prospects for financial gain here evaporated, the decline of Reesor began. By the end of the thirties, the collapse of the settlement, and the demise of the ideal it had for a time symbolized were inevitable. Nature and economics had triumphed over the values and traditions of these Russian Mennonites. Clearly this group differed from the Old Colony among whom not even political pressure and persecution could so completely undermine their traditional lifestyle and beliefs despite an absence of fifty years from that "commonwealth" in Russia.

Elsewhere in Ontario, the Russian Mennonites scattered widely in search of employment opportunities. Many moved repeatedly. In 1926, two years after their arrival, they were dispersed into some sixteen loosely-knit groups concentrated in four regions of the province. By 1928, the number of centres with Russian Mennonite settlers had increased to about thirty.<sup>52</sup> Bishop Jacob H. Janzen, whose task it was to unite and serve these farflung groups, lamented that "Material [forces] seem intent

on scattering [*zersplittern*] us and we can hardly gather the strength to counteract this splintering [*zersplitterung*] anymore . . . Through dispersion," he observed, "the feeling of belonging together disappears . . ." <sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the geographic dispersion among the immigrants continued, as did their efforts to learn the English language and become full-fledged citizens of their new homeland.

Janzen cautioned his people that this dispersion increased their susceptibility to the assimilative pressures of Anglo-Canadian society. He warned, moreover, that the loss of their *Eigenart* in this process constituted a regression to "the commonplace and the herd instincts of the masses." <sup>54</sup> . . . [N]o one gives up his *Eigenart*, insofar as it is God-given and good," he believed, "without suffering a grievous loss . . ." <sup>55</sup> B. B. Wiens concurred, suggesting that in the end nothing would remain of the Mennonites but "pitiful caricatures" of their true nature and purpose. <sup>56</sup>

Both Janzen and Wiens, therefore, devoted themselves tirelessly to "*Einigkeitsarbeit*" (the work of unification). "We are to become united [*eins werden*]," the Bishop exhorted, "indeed, we must become united. And if we do not . . ., then the world will overpower us . . ." <sup>57</sup> In effect, both men sought to replace, in their person and through their work, some of the unifying functions of the Russian Mennonite colonies. The self-designation of the *kirchliche* group as "*Die Vereinigte Mennonitengemeinde*" (The United Mennonite Church) illustrates that aim and effort.

Both the actions and attitudes of the newcomers, as already noted, demonstrated only a minimal allegiance to those values and ideals, however. In 1927 Bishop Janzen lamented to David Toews that "Each person looks out for himself, and the beautiful, common goals of the churches are all too easily obliterated . . ." <sup>58</sup> B. B. Wiens, likewise, noted an increasing preoccupation with "*das eigene Ich*" (the individual self) which resulted, as he observed it, in uncharacteristic "heartlessness, selfishness, jealousy and quarreling." <sup>59</sup> He remained confident nonetheless that "Many things can . . . be done by uniting our forces. Our past in R[ussia] taught us that. The future will show whether our idealism has fallen to pieces." <sup>60</sup>

The answer Wiens obtained through his involvement in a variety of immigrant organizations in Ontario must have saddened him. These structures and programs, instituted under the motto "*Einigkeit macht stark?*" (union is strength), remained embarrassingly weak. The *Selbsthilfekasse* (self-help benevolent fund), for instance, was established in 1929 to assist chronically ill or destitute immigrants in order to prevent their becoming a public charge and, in cases where they were not naturalized, possible deportation. A levy of five and later ten cents per month on all *arbeitsfaehige* (able to work) newcomers between the ages of 16 and 60 served as the source of income. In the early 1930s, Wiens

collected less than one third of this levy in most areas.<sup>61</sup> No funds were available to the temporarily ill or the unemployed and only two thirds of the cost of institutional care for the permanently ill could therefore be paid. By 1937, the level of participation had risen to only one half of those eligible to contribute to the fund.<sup>62</sup>

Wiens exhorted his fellow immigrants to demonstrate their commitment to the practice of mutual aid which had developed in Russia. According to David Rempel, "Mennonites have always taken care of their sick, poor, orphans, delinquents and defectives."<sup>63</sup> As evidence, he points to the hospitals, old people's homes, the school for deaf children, the orphanage, and the asylum for the mentally ill established in Russia. This heritage B. B. Wiens held high. "Our strength lies in the practice of benevolence" he maintained.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, he conceded that there were many who would not participate until they stood to benefit from it themselves. If the level of support for the self-help fund serves as any indication, there were clear limits to the tradition of benevolence among the Russian Mennonites.

The support the immigrants gave to the development of an institution for the mentally ill in Ontario reflects the same tendency. Delegates to the annual provincial immigrant meeting in 1937 rejected a proposal for the corporate ownership of such a "*Heim Fuer Geisteskranke*" despite the fact that there were 12 potential patients in Ontario alone, all of them at least partially dependent on public support for their maintenance. Only the determination and dedication, not to mention the personal financial resources, of one man, Henry P. Wiebe, who had begun to care for several patients in his own home, brought this institution into existence.<sup>65</sup>

A 1930 resolution on conference authority and congregational autonomy captures the condition of the Russian Mennonite immigrant community. It read as follows:

Questions of principle *may be debated* beforehand *but not decided upon* by the membership of the churches. The Conference adopts the resolutions, which *may then be accepted as binding* by the churches, *or rejected*.<sup>66</sup>

This self-contradictory statement on church policy reflected the fragmentation and confusion experienced by the newcomers. They were, by all indications, a broken people, broken in body and spirit. A part of them reached back into the past, seeking a history and an experience that may never have been as they thought they remembered it. Another part strained forward, anxious to get on with the difficult task of building a new life in a new world. A part, perhaps, was broken and shattered beyond repair. They sought each other's company, they preferred to be together, to work together, and make decisions together. Still, most were

unable to commit themselves individually to that broader community. Personally, they cherished the memories and values of a world long destroyed yet were determined to build a new home and a new life in a place and a time in which the old world could not be recaptured. They were, it seems, a people of two worlds and of two minds.

Russian institutions, or even ideals, could hardly be transplanted out-right into a new environment. Geographic and demographic factors prohibited large-scale cooperation and effective communication. Moreover, the constant mobility which marked the lives of most Mennonite immigrants in Ontario during the first decade and a half after their entry undermined the stability of immigrant organizations, religious and secular. Even more critical were forces largely beyond anyone's control, economic conditions which transformed the efforts at resettlement into a struggle for existence, overshadowing a long tradition and deep convictions about mutual aid and brotherly compassion. Religion became, in that context, more deeply individualistic and personal and much less social or communal, a process hastened if not begun by the persecution and destruction under Bolshevik rule. While a few leaders strove valiantly and eloquently to rebuild a people, therefore, individuals sought primarily to rebuild their lives and their families. Therein lies the tragedy of the Mennonite experience and the incongruity between belief and life, between tradition and reality, which emerged among the Russian Mennonites in Ontario.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>David G. Rempel, "Alternative service in World War I: Simplistic approach creates myths," *Mennonite Reporter*, October 3, 1983, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* (Berne, Ind.: Mennonite Book Concern, 1941), p. 712.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 700.

<sup>4</sup>Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 410. Cf. *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, Man.: D. W. Friesen & Sons, 1962), pp. 103-105.

<sup>5</sup>Frank H. Epp, "Problems of Mennonite Identity: A Historical Study," in *The Canadian Ethnic Mosaic*, ed. Leo Driedger (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978) p. 285.

<sup>6</sup>John H. Redekop, "Church and State in Canada: Co-operation and Confrontation," in *The Believers' Church in Canada*, ed. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen (n.p.: The Baptist Federation of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee [Canada], 1979), p. 198.

<sup>7</sup>For a summary of the volatile economic, political and social conditions during the 1920s see Donald Avery, *"Dangerous Foreigners"* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), ch. 4.

<sup>8</sup>Epp, *Exodus*, p. 105.

<sup>9</sup>Mackenzie King diaries (Public Archives of Canada), Nov. 5, 1929.

<sup>10</sup>A. A. Friesen, during the course of negotiations with the government for the admission of the Russian Mennonites, wrote to J. A. Calder, the Minister responsible for immigration, pointing out the differences among the various Mennonite groups. He emphasized that the branch "which seeks to keep aloof from the Canadian people" was not representative and that the majority were "fully Americanized." A. A. Friesen to J. A. Calder, July 25, 1921. PAC Immigration Branch, RG 95, vol. 196, pt. 1 (1921-24).

<sup>11</sup>Quoted by Epp, *Exodus*, p. 145.

<sup>12</sup>Avery; <sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup>*Manitoba Free Press*, Aug. 19, 1924, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup>The Kitchener-Waterloo *Daily Record*, July 21, 1924, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>Henry Paetkau, "A Struggle for Survival. The Russian Mennonite Immigrants in Ontario, 1924-39." (unpublished M. A. thesis, University of Waterloo, 1977), pp. 57-67.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Dick, Leamington. Mennonites in Canada, "1920 Leamington" file. Conrad Grebel College archives, Waterloo, Ontario (hereafter cited as CGC).

<sup>19</sup>D. E., "Ein Wohlgemeintes Wort an die mennonitischen Arbeiter in den Fabriken Ontarios," *Der Bote*, III (Sept. 22, 1926), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Herman Koop, interview #12 in the series of Oral History Interviews of Russian-Mennonite Immigrants of the 1920's (Ontario). CGC. Cf. interview #19.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in a letter from the Canada Colonization Association of the Canadian Pacific Railway to David Toews, Jan. 6, 1928. Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization records, Heritage Centre, Conference of Mennonites in Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba (hereafter CMBC).

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>D. E., "Das Problem der Anhäufung von Immigranten, welche von den Farmen nach Kitchener gehen, soll vor den Immigrationsminister gebracht werden," *Der Bote*, V (Jan. 11, 1928), p. 2.

<sup>24</sup>J. H. Janzen to David Toews, Feb. 9, 1927. Jacob H. Janzen papers, C-I, CGC. (Originals at Bethel College, Newton, Kansas).

<sup>25</sup>Protokoll einer ausserordentlichen Sitzung des Kitchener-Waterlooer Immigrantenkomitees am 23. Januar 1928," *Der Bote*, V (Feb. 8, 1928), p. 2.

<sup>26</sup>David Toews to B. B. Wiens, Dec. 20, 1927. B. B. Wiens file, CMBC.

<sup>27</sup>"Die Vertreterversammlung in Reinland, Manitoba, 23-25 November 1927," *Der Bote*, IV (Dec. 21, 1927), p. 6.

<sup>28</sup>B. B. Wiens to D. H. Epp, Nov. 15, 1929. Zentrales Mennonitisches Immigranten Komitee papers (Hereafter ZMIK), CMBC.

<sup>29</sup>John Friesen, "Manitoba Mennonites in the Rural-Urban Shift," *Mennonite Life*, XXIII (Oct., 1968), p. 153.

<sup>30</sup>Cornelius Krahn, "Research on Urban Mennonites," p. 190.

<sup>31</sup>S. F. Coffman to David Toews, Oct. 18, 1924. S. F. Coffman file, CMBC.

<sup>32</sup>David Toews to B. B. Janz, May 11, 1927. B. B. Janz papers, Group II, file 18b, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

<sup>33</sup>"Die Vertreterversammlung in Reinland, Manitoba."

<sup>34</sup>"Die Bedeutung einer festen Organisation," *Der Bote*, VI (Feb. 21, 1929), p. 1.

<sup>35</sup>Seventh Census of Canada, 1931, vol. I, Table 44.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, Table 43.

<sup>37</sup>*Eight Census of Canada*, 1941, vol. II, Table 36.

<sup>38</sup>B. B. Wiens, "Bericht des Vertreters des Z.M.I.K. für Ontario," *Der Bote*, VII (Nov. 26, 1930), p. 2; "Geschichte des seit 1924 in Ontario eingewanderten russländischen Mennoniten," *Der Bote*, X (Aug. 2, 1933), p. 1.

<sup>39</sup>"Die Vertreterversammlung in Reinland, Manitoba."

<sup>40</sup>J. H. Janzen to David Toews, Feb. 5, 1927. CGC.

<sup>41</sup>Adolf Nörgler [J. H. Janzen], "Emigrantenbriefe," *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, XLVIII (April 29, 1925), p. 7. Cf. J. H. Janzen, "Wie wahren wir unsere mennonitische Eigenart?" *Der Bote*, VI (May 15, 1929), p. 2.

<sup>42</sup>B. B. Wiens, "Geschichte der seit 1924 . . ." (Aug. 9, 1933), p. 1.

<sup>43</sup>The classic formulation of the "commonwealth" concept is by David G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia: A Sketch of its Founding and Endurance, 1789-1919," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XLVII (Oct., 1973), pp. 259-308; XLVIII (Jan., 1974), pp. 5-54.

<sup>44</sup>Leo Driedger, "Fifty years of Mennonite Identity in Winnipeg: A Sacred Canopy in a Changing Laboratory," *Mennonite Images*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980), p. 127.

- <sup>45</sup>J. H. Janzen, "Rettung?" *Der Bote*, XI (Aug. 15, 1934), p. 3. Cf. J. H. Janzen, "Wie wahren wir . . ."
- <sup>46</sup>David Rempel, p. 10.
- <sup>47</sup>B. B. Wiens, "Bericht des Vertreters."
- <sup>48</sup>J. H. Janzen, "Siedlungsmoeglichkeiten in Ontario," *Der Bote*, II (Nov. 25, 1925), p. 2.
- <sup>49</sup>J. Töws, "Die Ansiedlung in Nord Ontario," *Der Bote*, III (Aug. 4, 1926), p. 2.
- <sup>50</sup>B. B. Wiens report to ZMIK, July 2-3, 1931. ZMIK minutes, CMBC.
- <sup>51</sup>For a summary of the Reesor story see Henry Paetkau, pp. 47-57.
- <sup>52</sup>Jacob H. Janzen, "Mennoniten Flüchtlings-Gemeinde in Ontario," *Christlicher Bundesbote*, XLV (June 17, 1926), pp. 5-6; "Port Rowan (vom 25. -27. Februar 1928)." (unpublished manuscript, 1928), p. 5. Janzen collection, CGC.
- <sup>53</sup>J. H. Janzen to David Toews, Feb. 5, 1927. Janzen collection, CGC.
- <sup>54</sup>Janzen, "Wie wahren wir," (May 8, 1929), p. 1.
- <sup>55</sup>J. H. Janzen, "Bericht ueber die Entstehung und Entwicklung der 'Vereinigten Mennonitengemeinde in Ontario' vom Januar 1925 bis September 1927." (unpublished report, Sept. 4, 1927), p. 2. Janzen collection, CGC.
- <sup>56</sup>Wiens, "Bericht des Vertreters," p. 1.
- <sup>57</sup>J. H. Janzen, "Das Eins Werden." *Der Bote*, V (April 25, 1928), p. 1.
- <sup>58</sup>J. H. Janzen to David Toews, Feb. 5, 1927. Janzen collection, CGC.
- <sup>59</sup>B. B. Wiens, "Bericht des Vertreters," *Der Bote*, XI (Jan. 10, 1934), p. 4.
- <sup>60</sup>B. B. Wiens to David Toews, Feb. 6, 1937. David Toews papers, CMBC.
- <sup>61</sup>"Bericht der Verwaltung der 'Selbsthilfe' in Ontario," *Der Bote*, IX (Dec. 7, 1932), p. 6.
- <sup>62</sup>"Protokoll der 9. V.V. der Provinz Ontario." (minutes of the annual meeting, Nov. 20-21, 1937). Files of the Conference of United Mennonite Churches in Ontario, Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- <sup>63</sup>David Rempel, p. 39.
- <sup>64</sup>"Bericht der Verwaltung."
- <sup>65</sup>"A Struggle for Survival," pp. 130-32.
- <sup>66</sup>"Protokoll der Allgemeinen Konferenz der Vereinigten Mennonitengemeinden in Ontario am 25. u. 26. October 1930 zu Leamington, Ontario," item 6. Janzen collection, CGC. Emphasis added.