

Murder and Madness in a Mennonite Village

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On October 2, 2006, a man with a gun walked into an Amish school near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, and killed five Amish girls, ages six to thirteen. The event became a media sensation, especially since the Amish, like their Mennonite cousins, are a pacifist religious community known for their quiet ways.

For me, the event recalled an October day of a century earlier, October 9, 1902, when a gunman entered a Mennonite school in southern Manitoba and shot three little girls, killing one of them, after shooting three school trustees outside. One of the girls who survived was my Grandmother, Susana Rempel Loewen. In this case, however, it was her Mennonite teacher who was the murderer.

On that day, the children in the one-room school in the village of Altona had just returned from lunch to resume classes with their teacher, Mr. Heinrich Toews. On the bench at the back of the classroom sat two friends, Susana Rempel and Helena Kehler, both ten years old. Helena's sister Annie, age eight, sat just in front of them. The girls were the daughters of school trustees Abram Rempel and Peter Kehler, and lived just across the road from the school.

The trustees had scheduled a meeting with the teacher that afternoon to discuss some problems. Abram Rempel and John Hiebert



Annie & Helena Kehler



Teacher Heinrich J. Toews and student

arrived first and Mr. Toews invited them into the school. The trustees said they preferred to talk elsewhere so the children would not be disturbed. Standing outside, the two men began to spell out their concerns. Suddenly, Toews pulled out a revolver and shot Hiebert in the right hip, the bullet passing through his abdomen and lodging in his left hip. Then he took aim at Rempel, who jumped to one side when he heard the first shot but was hit in his left shoulder, the bullet moving down through his body. Peter Kehler, a third trustee, arrived on the scene just in time to see the shooting. He turned to run but received a bullet in his hand. Meanwhile, Hiebert and Rempel were fleeing toward the neighbour's yard. Toews fired another three shots at Rempel: the first hit his back and pierced a lung; the second grazed his neck, while the third, from a greater distance, left a bruise on his spine. Both Rempel and Hiebert reached the neighbour's house, and Kehler escaped as well.

Toews then turned and walked into the school. According to the German-language newspaper, *Der Nordwesten*, Toews first approached Susana Rempel and fired two shots, one bullet entering her right arm near the elbow and the other passing through her upper arm. Then he moved to Helena Kehler, shooting her twice through the chest and once in the arm, somehow missing vital organs ("Ein entsetzliches Verbrechen," 16 Oct. 1902). The three shots fired at little Annie Kehler proved fatal – she died the next day. Toews then left the schoolhouse and fled toward the nearby town. As he was approached by a man he knew, Toews put the gun to his own head and fired. The bullet tore through an eye but missed his brain. He was taken into custody where he remained, blind and in pain, until his death three and a half months later.

Reports of the Event

We have various accounts of this shooting and of the teacher who did this terrible deed. The main sources are the German language periodical published in Winnipeg, *Der Nordwesten*, and the two Winnipeg dailies – the *Manitoba Free Press* and the *Winnipeg Daily Tribune*. (This article uses two different English translations of the *Nordwesten* article, as indicated in Works Cited below.) Reporters had a field day with the story, describing Toews in the most sensational terms. “Crazed by the sight of his victims, Toews’ passion got beyond all control,” stated the *Free Press*, predicting that five people would die as a result of this “diabolical” crime, a crime “unequalled in the history of western Canada” (10 Oct. 1902). The *Tribune* called Toews a “human fiend” full of “impassioned hate” who committed an “awful slaughter” (11 Oct. 1902). Both papers incorrectly placed the shooting in Rempel’s house, and the *Tribune* had Peter Kehler attacking Toews and fighting with him in an attempt to get the gun.

The German language newspaper was equally lurid, describing Toews as a *Wüterich*, a raging tyrant or bloodthirsty villain. (The *Preservings* translation, “A Horrible Crime”, translated *Wüterich* as “Tartar”, with connotations of fiendish Russian hordes.) The killer had “rage spewing from his eyes” as he committed this “crime of unthinkable horror” (“Shocking Crime”). The *Nordwesten* pulled out all the emotional stops in picturing the death of Annie Kehler: “In order to reach her he pushed the bench back somewhat lifted her jacket and placed the muzzle directly on her body and fired.... In her final pains when her mind fantasized, she kept on appealing to her teacher by saying, ‘Oh Teacher, please be kind to me. I will be good!’” (“Shocking Crime”).

We also have an account by Toews’ brother, Bernhard Toews, in German and in two English translations. The story of the shooting has been recalled in the *Red River Valley Echo* several times (1967, 1970 and 1995); two of these articles are based on interviews with Susana Rempel Loewen. The incident is also mentioned in two Altona histories, and in a booklet published in Paraguay, entitled *Das kurze, leidvolle Leben des Heinrich J. Toews* (The short, sorrowful life of Heinrich J. Toews), which includes the Bernhard Toews account.¹

How could this happen?

What explains this horrific deed by a Mennonite teacher? Details of Toews’ life are sketchy, but a few documents give some insight into the mind of this troubled man. Heinrich Toews first came to Altona

village (Old Altona) to teach in 1899 at the age of 33 and he boarded at the home of trustee Abram (or Abraham) Rempel and his wife Helena, my great-grandparents. In a rather bizarre arrangement, Toews slept right in the classroom – his bed was in the front corner beside his desk. There was an old schoolhouse on the property designated as a teacher's residence, but Toews, who was single, decided to live in the schoolroom and eat his meals at the Rempel home across the street (*Nordwesten*).

At Christmas during his first year in Altona, Toews disappeared and did not return to complete the school year. On February 9, 1900, Toews wrote a letter of resignation to the "Honourable School Trustees of Altona School District" and explained his breach of contract: "I hereby tender my resignation as teacher in the village of Altona, to take effect at once. Reason as set forth in the accompanying certificate from the doctor. With sincere thanks for favors received while serving you in this capacity, I am yours respectfully H.J. Toews, (teacher) Altona, Man."

The accompanying letter, addressed to J.J. Loewen, secretary and treasurer of the Altona School District, was typewritten under the elaborate letterhead of the "State Electro-Medical Institute" in Minneapolis, which offered "Combined treatment of the great curative powers Medicine [and] Electricity", recommended by "Best Banks and Leading Business Men of the City." The certificate reads: "This is to certify that Mr. H. J. Toews has for some time past and is now, under medical treatment at this Institute for a complication of ailments and especially partial paralysis, and is therefore unable at this time, and for some time to come, to attend to his duties or any of whatsoever kind." The signature appears to be "E.M. Bayley, M.D., Physician in Chief" (Letter to J.J. Loewen).

In a letter to his friend, Jacob Braun, dated February 15, Toews confirms that he has no intention of returning to Altona. He states that he has written to J.J. Loewen of the school board, suggesting that "since my return seems to be rather indefinite, it would be better to engage a teacher right now and also one for next year. I wrote him that on account of my health I would not be able to commit myself at this time." Despite his resignation, Toews returned to Altona to teach in the fall of 1901 and again found "a friendly reception" in the Rempel home ("A Horrible Crime").

He seems to have completed the 1901-02 year, but then went for treatment again, this time to the Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan ("A Well-equipped and Scientific Medical Establishment," according to its letterhead). The Altona School District tried twice to contact Toews there during the summer, presumably about his plans for the coming year. A July 28, 1902 letter from the Battlecreek Post Office to F.F. Siemens of the School District indicates that the post office has been unable to locate Toews but will hold Siemens' letter until further notice

(Letter to F.F. Siemens from Battlecreek Post Office). Toews finally replied to Siemens on sanitarium letterhead on August 26. This time writing in German gothic script, Toews blames the negligence of the post office for not getting the first letter to him. The second one missed him, he explains, because he was away on a twelve-day trip to Niagara Falls and New York City.

When Toews resumed teaching in the Altona school in the fall of 1902, tensions quickly mounted, especially in the Rempel household where he was taking his meals. According to Susana Rempel Loewen, who had just turned ten in September, Toews became more and more demanding and difficult to please. Meals had to be “on the dot” even though he wasn’t always on time himself. When Mrs. Rempel reprimanded him one day for his behaviour “he slammed the door so hard that the dishes rattled on the table,” said Susana Rempel Loewen. “He was angry about something. But why, we didn’t know. Mother felt she had put up with this situation long enough and right then asked him to find another place to eat.” Toews asked trustee Peter Kehler if he could board there, but Kehler turned him down. So Toews had to take his meals at the hotel in the town of Altona, about a kilometre away (“Altona teacher”).

These rejections appeared to inflame an already smoldering resentment and Toews began to take out his anger on the children. In class, he called the Rempel and Kehler girls forward and encouraged the other pupils to jeer at them. Whoever refused to do so was whipped. During recess, the girls were forbidden to play with the other children and were banned to the street. According to Susana Rempel Loewen, Toews appointed a “guard” over the shunned children, with permission to use a stick on them. He also encouraged the pupils to harass and throw stones at the girls on the way home. The children apparently did not report this abuse to their parents (*Nordwesten*).²

Susana Rempel Loewen recalled this incident many years later: “How my parents found out was that my father, Abram Rempel, saw the girl, my guard, strike my head with a stick which left a lump the size of an egg. My father, who was also a trustee, rushed over to see what this was all about” (“Altona teacher”). On the morning of October 9, Rempel and Kehler came to the school to confront the teacher. Rempel became so agitated that he grabbed the pointer stick and struck it on the desk and stove several times, splintering it. Both trustees soon realized that they were accomplishing nothing and promised to return in the afternoon with the rest of the trustees (*Nordwesten*). Toews had his gun ready when they arrived.

What was wrong with Mr. Toews?

While the records are of little help in explaining Toews' extreme outburst, they do include various attempts to describe the man. Heinrich J. Toews was born on May 6, 1866 in the district of Ekaterinoslav in southern Russia, the second son and third child of Jakob Toews and Anna Wiebe. His father died when he was young and his mother married Johann Bergmann, who brought his family to Manitoba with the Mennonite migration of 1874-76. (Bergmann apparently headed the sale of Bergthal Colony properties in Russia before the emigration.) Toews grew up in the village of Reinland, about thirty kilometres from Altona. He was not a certified teacher but taught by permit, which barred him from the better-paying public school system. He taught in the Mennonite village of Neuhoffnung for seven years before coming to Altona village in 1899 (*Nordwesten*).

After the shooting incident, the newspapers interviewed numerous people in an attempt to get a portrait of this deranged teacher. The *Nordwesten* characterized Toews as follows: "As a teacher he was well-liked by pupils and parents. Even though he had only a permit as a teacher, he was able to motivate the children well. Generally, he was a calm personality, although at times he did get aroused and seemed to suffer from an unreasonable estimate of his own person. This characteristic, plus a nervous breakdown brought on by a secret vice that he indulged in, may have brought him to this terrible state... if one does not want to place the blame on a case of temporary insanity. In terms of his religious life, Toews never joined a church. All our readers know him from his travelogues written for this *Nordwesten*" ("Shocking Crime").

The translator of this article in *Preservings*, presumably editor Delbert Plett, chose more dramatic language, describing Toews as "at times showing an irritability in his being and an unbelievable overrating of his own personality. This personality trait together with a thorough upheaval of his nervous system in conjunction with an indulged-in secret vice not to be described further possibly led him to this shuddering deed, if one is not inclined to grasp at the popular explanation of temporary insanity" ("A Horrible Crime").

The Winnipeg dailies quoted a number of villagers on the subject. Knowing the elementary level of English attained by Susana Rempel Loewen, never mind her parents' generation, it is difficult to know how to assess these quotes. Did the Mennonites speak through an interpreter? Did the reporters piece together their broken English or put words in their mouths? A *Free Press* story (12 Oct.) noted: "From the way people here talk of Toews, the murderer, it seems strange that they would place children under the charge of such a man. Besides

being of a taciturn disposition, it is generally admitted he was of a weak mind.” Klaus Peters, the Mennonite immigration agent of the CPR, who was probably fluent in English, was quoted in the *Free Press* (11 Oct.) as saying that Toews “was rather of a peculiar temperament, inclined to be morose...he was being treated at a sanitarium for dyspepsia.”

The *Tribune* (11 Oct.) quoted a neighbour as saying:

I know this teacher, Henry Toews, well.... I never heard him spoken of as a violent or hot-tempered man. I was rather under the impression that he was a slow-going quiet fellow. I had heard that he was quick-tempered in school at times, but thought nothing about it, as this is a fault of many teachers and is no doubt due to the nervous strain upon them. I always understood that he was fond of the children, and was liked very well socially until last year when some complaints arose, though I am not sure of their exact nature.

This neighbour went on to speculate that the complaints may have been over discipline problems or Toews’ lack of certification as a teacher.

It is clear that no one has an adequate explanation for Toews’ extreme behaviour. Even Dr. Hiebert, attending physician of the injured in Altona, seems baffled: “He occasionally was erratic and was called ‘cranky’ by all who knew him. He lived a very secluded life, which possibly had the effect of increasing any tendencies towards insanity which he may have had.... I knew him for years. I considered him erratic and queer, but nothing more. I knew he was morbid and gloomy at times, but thought nothing of the matter,” adding that he once prescribed sleeping pills for the man (*Tribune*, 13 Oct.).

Toews’ Confession

Given these press reports, and the vague statements about Toews’ medical treatments, we can only guess at his afflictions or the “secret vice” alluded to in the German-language press (surprisingly, not mentioned in the English language dailies). However, we do have a dramatic “confession” from Toews himself that reveals the depth of his mental and spiritual struggles. This confession comes in a letter Toews wrote to his friend Jacob Braun while receiving treatment at the institute in Minneapolis. The carbon copy of this letter that I possess is a badly typed, cramped document of just over two fourteen-inch pages. I assume it is a transcription of Toews’ original letter because of its many strikeouts and question marks, suggesting that the transcriber couldn’t always make out Toews’ handwriting. (Other letters from

Toews are beautifully written – was he unusually agitated when he wrote this one or is my copy simply by a bad typist?) This letter is reprinted in *Das kurze leidvolle Leben des Heinrich J. Toews* but with significant editing and deletions. My copy is undated but the reprint in the booklet dates it as February 15, 1900.

This letter reveals the desperation of a tormented soul poured out onto the page in high romantic style, full of overwrought images and dramatic self-loathing and few specifics. One sees evidence here of a well-read, gifted writer who is obviously plagued by guilt, resentment and deep depression. It seems that even his closest friends do not realize the depth of his despair.

Addressed to his “mostly intimately beloved friend, Jacob Braun,” Toews graphically describes his shipwrecked state. “You console yourself in your letter that I have gone on a trip for convalescing and do not realize that my ship of life is in the darkest spiritual night, tossed about by storms...and headed for the dangerous rapids. I have too long neglected looking to the star (Jesus) and the compass (Word of God) to orient me. I have moved so far off course that I fear I am close to the Island of the Sirens where...all who came near ran aground, except for Odysseus who managed to escape with his life.”

Toews seems to be straining for adequate language to express his utter hopelessness. “Oh, it is inexpressibly desolate, empty, cold and woeful in my heart.... Battered about in exile is the wintry bleakness of my soul. Fog before me, fog behind me, fog around me. I live without a past....and without a future. I have never known what happiness is, and have long forgotten what hope is. Only a dark dream shudders in my heart. Yes, blossoms and rosebuds hung resplendent on the tree of my life but before they could bear fruit the harsh breath of reality hit them like a storm and now the tree is stripped of foliage. I feel as though the ‘Menne Tekel’ is written above my life where everyone can read it: ‘Weighed and found wanting.’ Oh, that is why prayer is lost on me. My spirit is dulled and without strength, my heart is dry and unreceptive like a withered tree.... likely no one my age is as unfortunate and joyless as I am. I feel that my grave is near and what do I take there with me? Nothing out of this rich life but mistakes, sin and sickness; a maimed body, a dying spirit...and an eon of regrets.”

Unfortunately, Toews does not spell out the nature of the “sin and sickness” that torture him. In what sense is his body “maimed” and what are the mistakes he continues to regret? The diagnosis of the Minneapolis medical institute – “a complication of ailments and especially partial paralysis” – is no help at all. Toews’ images become startlingly suggestive as he recalls standing at the crossroads in his youth, trying to decide whether to turn onto “the sunny paths of virtue” or “into hell...a dark cave dripping with poison and hissing snakes and dark,

muggy vapours. The snakes are draped around my neck and poison drops onto my tongue and sometimes I don't know where to leave myself." Here Toews seems to move beyond the biblical image of the evil serpent and into the nightmare territory of psychic breakdown. Is he aware of the archetypal potency of the snake image? Contemporary readers can hardly avoid the suggestion of sexual guilt or dysfunction in this vivid passage.

"That's how I felt before I secretly left Altona," Toews continues in the letter, adding in an interesting choice of words that he left "without committing a crime and very depressed." His greatest regret is that he can't study more because his health won't permit it. His meagre salary goes mostly to doctors, so he is enduring financial as well as spiritual shipwreck. He likes nothing more than teaching but can't get into the district schools where there are better salaries. Now even in Altona his good reputation, happiness and health "lie buried in ruins and nothing more is left in me to be spoiled. Oh! I wish to be forgotten by all Altona people forever, and to be erased from their memory, as if wiped from the face of the earth." (Note that this is two years before the murder.) Toews recalls a minister who reminded him of the unceasing prayers of his mother and asked if the recipient of so many prayers can be lost. Yes he can, responded Toews. "A mother can bring her child before the cross of Christ, but believing each one must do for himself." Given his earlier regret about neglecting his faith, one can surmise that some form of "religious anxiety" must also have played a role in Toews' desperate state of mind.

The letter to Jacob Braun ends with a bizarre account of Toews trying to chase down a Mr. Unger who had stolen \$85 from him, apparently while they were on a trip together, but Unger got away. This is not the only time that Toews mentions unusual travelling companions.

The Travel Writer

Travelling was one of Toews' greatest pleasures. The *Nordwesten* reports of the murder reminded readers that they know Toews from his travelogues. He was a remarkable travel writer and obviously knew how to get around. In the spring of 1902, Toews attended a conference of the National Educational Association in St. Paul, Minnesota, and then took extensive trips to Chicago, Niagara Falls and New York City. He published his observations in four issues of the *Nordwesten* (August and September 1902).

Toews' account of his Chicago visit reveals his passionate interest in history, industry and urban life, and his obsession with statistics: "28 railway companies in Chicago have 6 large and 10 smaller stations.

More than 300 mail and passenger trains move through Chicago carrying 75,000 passengers. On top of that 500 local trains are needed to transport 125,000 workers” (“Travelogue”). Toews visited factories and businesses, the Rand McNally publishing house, parks, museums and many other sites, always noting the number of employees, the size of the buildings and other numerical details. (“Chicago has 78 fire engines that attend an average of 25 fires per day. The more than one and a half million citizens of Chicago are protected by 3500 police who arrest 90,000 persons each year, and who in turn pay fines of half a million dollars.”)

It seems Toews got into some of these establishments through letters of reference he carried from Altona School Inspector H.H. Ewert, F.F. Siemens of the school district, and Reeve Cornelius Bergmann. “Two years prior to this I found no entrance to these places, but with these letters identifying me, it was different.” At the “McCormack factory” (probably the McCormick farm machinery firm that became International Harvester in 1902) he was invited to dine with senior people. “I did not feel worthy of the privilege, but it was not the time to protest.”

Leaving Chicago, Toews crossed Lake Michigan to the town of Battle Creek where he checked into a sanitarium. His account ends with details of his life there:

Treatment is wonderful since people do not believe in medicine and do not give it to any patients. They hold to a water therapy and a strict vegetarian diet.... Most of the patients, including myself, have ailing stomachs and thus we get no meat but only easily digestible food.... A bath is the first order of the day, followed by arm exercises.... Breakfast is followed by Swedish gymnastics, club and dumbbell exercises.... Economical excursions to various places are readily available.

Battle Creek, which sounds more like a spa, does not seem to be a treatment centre for mental illness, such as the medical institute in Minneapolis. Perhaps that is why Toews feels so free to write about it. His reference to stomach ailments explains Klaus Peters’ statement quoted earlier that Toews was being treated for dyspepsia.

The next installment published in the *Nordwesten* described Toews’ trip to Niagara Falls and New York City. At the falls, he and his companion arrived before the guides and went into forbidden territory. Toews pens a lively account of their adventure: “My comrade, a daredevil, started down the stairway, urging me to come. I hesitated and pointed to the sign, but was finally persuaded and besides, I was very curious to see the Falls from the bottom. I finally followed,

looking back repeatedly to see whether a guard might appear. When we were almost to the bottom, the unwelcome guard did appear at the top. Without a moment's preparation he preached to us his morning blessing in the form of a 'curtain' sermon that was spiced with choice words and gesticulations. It was unfortunate that with the great noise of the water it was impossible for us to hear the text and thus we lost the kernel of his sermon, receiving only straw and chaff. We were not bothered any more than that." Toews' comrade, later called his "partner", is not identified – was it someone he just happened to meet on the trip? At least this partner is simply a "daredevil" and not a thief.

Toews was thrilled by the fast train to New York that reached speeds of 75 miles an hour and "whizzed past the little stations leaving only a cloud of dust in our wake." A man at the sanitarium "who knew New York as well as I know Reinland" had made a list of interesting sights for him to see. The first thing he did was hire a vehicle to ride around Central Park "in order to understand its size." He toured museums and galleries, the Statue of Liberty, the Waldorf Astoria, Wall Street and several ships. He saw "the largest printing press in the world" at the *New York Herald* and sat in the seat where George Washington had worshipped in St. Paul's Chapel. He was fascinated with the lives of the rich and famous, visiting the mansions of the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts and noting that the stables "would be considered as luxurious houses if they were found on our reserve." He visits famous stores, such as Tiffany's, where one can see "famous personalities of the tender sex" who dress in "various and rare costumes", as well as the theatre district which features "the rich and the educated society of New York".

This travelogue ends with the words: "Tomorrow I must leave here in order to open the school in Altona on September 2." One can only imagine the emotions behind this statement. After experiencing the excitement and cultural riches of two of the greatest cities in North America, the prospect of going back to teach in a little rural schoolhouse must have seemed bleak indeed.

The Last Days of Heinrich Toews

We have a detailed and extremely sympathetic account of Toews' last months written by his brother Bernhard ("Der tragische Vorfall").³ After a brief stay in a Winnipeg hospital, Toews was moved to the prison where he died. Contrary to the *Free Press* (20 Jan. 1903), which reported that Toews' diet consisted "not only of the necessities of life, but of luxuries such as wine, soft drinks and other things generally given to sick persons," Bernhard said that his brother had only milk and water, and occasionally some orange juice squeezed into his mouth.

By the end of December, Toews was very weak and emaciated. (My grandmother, Susana Rempel Loewen, always said he had starved himself to death.) Bernhard said his brother had no memory of the shooting but when told about it he was abjectly penitent. Bernhard also quoted the doctor as saying, "Actually Toews has never been quite right in his head." (Quotes are from "Heinrich J Toews" trans.)

"The Evil One had misled my brother to the point where he used him to try to kill others and then make an attempt on his own life! But the Evil One's intentions were unsuccessful," wrote Bernhard ("Heinrich J Toews"). By God's grace, Heinrich regained consciousness after six days and was able to reflect back over his life and pray for forgiveness for all his sins. (God's grace also seems the only explanation for why not more people were killed. How could Toews have "missed" so many times?) Bernhard said his brother could not believe he had done such a terrible thing. He wept and prayed and asked church leaders to pray for him during worship services in Altona. All rejoiced over his repentance. "He wanted so much to make everything right and begged for the third time to ask the Altona people on his behalf for forgiveness" ("Heinrich J Toews"). Bernhard said that his brother regretted not being baptized but it seems that no one suggested he do it now.

In December, Bishop Johan Wiebe asked Toews how he had come to commit such a deed. Toews said that a kind of insanity must have overcome him, or "the Evil One became so strong within that he could use him as his instrument." He said he could remember nothing. "I know only that the thought came to me somewhere that I must shoot myself and then I'll be gone" ("Heinrich J Toews"). (Did Toews perhaps have a gun because he was planning suicide?) Toews told his brother how depressed he was but urged Bernhard not to say "anything beyond the truth" so as not to be plagued by conscience later.

Heinrich Toews died on the morning of January 19 "as peacefully as a child falling asleep," according to his brother. "I thanked the loving God for hearing my prayers and snatching my beloved brother from all the fears of facing a human court" ("Heinrich J Toews"). The *Free Press* reported: "Toews...has never spoken of the crime to any of his keepers...has always been morose and quiet" (20 Jan. 1903). Toews was buried in the Weidenfeld Cemetery with Sommerfelder Bishop Abram Doerksen preaching the sermon.

I visited that cemetery recently and could find no headstone belonging to Heinrich, although his brother's has been recently restored. As a murderer and a suicide, would Heinrich have been buried outside the cemetery? At the funeral, Bishop Doerksen compared Heinrich to the prodigal son and to the thief on the cross whom Jesus promised to meet in paradise. The bishop "spoke very earnestly about the need

to watch and pray, indicating that the deceased before us was a clear example of how far the Evil One can take us” (“Heinrich J Toews”). This strong belief in the objective reality of Evil seems to have allowed the church community to move beyond blame and hatred of the sinner, and to focus on God’s mercy.

Response of the Community

The press reflected the stoical and even conciliatory attitude of the Altona community. Nine days after the shooting, the *Free Press* reported: “When Toews fell the villagers forgot their desire for vengeance” and carried the injured man to the doctor. “The people here are nearly all Germans or Mennonites, and while deeply shocked, they view the tragedy with natural solidity, and are quite content to allow the law to take its course” (11 Oct. 1902). *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* published a 24-stanza ballad about the murder in its July 22, 1903 issue. Written by Abraham Ens, this emotional narrative is full of *Jammerschmerz* and *Mutterherz* (anguish and motherlove). Translation is by the poet’s grandson, Edward Enns.

The pupils see the revolver’s flash;
 Three shots ring out — God, O God!
 Three innocent girls sink to their knees.
 Such a murder has not been known before.
 The murderer flees (and with him Satan’s horde)
 As if the deed is naught to him...
 But, O dear mother, living still...
 God can and wants to save your blind child
 Out of Satan’s deathly chains of sin.
 Even though the sin be red from murderer’s blood,
 Jesus, the Mediator, has paid it all.
 (Ens, “About the murder-drama in Altona, Manitoba”).

The praying mother (that popular Victorian image) is also the theme of a 26-stanza song by Abram Harder published in *Das kurze leidvolle Leben des Heinrich J. Toews* (page 22). The chorus is: *O je, o weh, o Jammerschmerz! / Es weint das liebe Mutterherz* (O woe, o grief, o anguish! / The loving motherheart is weeping). The song ends with the assurance that God granted Toews a blessed death. These works bring to mind the narrative tradition of Anabaptist hymns in the *Ausbund*, except here the subject is the murderer, not the martyr.

Das kurze leidvolle Leben des Heinrich J. Toews ends with these words: “Heinrich J. Toews was known by many people. Now he rests

in the Weidenfeld cemetery where a mound of earth covers his earthly body and we must reflect on his deeds, whether good or bad. Because a person has both good and bad deeds and good and bad thoughts.... All is well" (page 26, my translation). One gets a strong sense here of the church as a community that acts on the sinner's behalf, presenting their weaker brother to God, knowing that God will judge with mercy. That is quite different from the judgmental Mennonite church of the past we so often hear about.

What people really felt is another matter, especially the families of the little girls. Susana Rempel Loewen's conclusion was not as kind or as pious. In her 1967 interview she said that "this whole event was the result of jealousy, pride, stubbornness and displeasure on the part of the teacher, Mr. Toews. It was not unpremeditated. The timing had been planned for weeks." This coincides with the judgment of the inquest, where several school children and a doctor testified, which determined that there was no suggestion of insanity (*Free Press*, 12 Oct. 1902). We have no record of how the fathers of those little girls felt about running away from the scene and leaving the gunman with a classroom full of children.

In a somewhat bizarre turn, Toews' family asked the school board to pay them the \$45 owing from Toews' last month of teaching. The school board consulted lawyers in Winnipeg who answered that "we would think that you are not legally liable to pay the same. However, the question as to whether or not it would be advisable to refuse payment or contest the claim of the deceased's representatives, lies with the School Board for decision" (Jan. 28, 1903 letter from Campbell & Crawford Barristers). I have no record of what they decided.

Despite the news reports, letters and documents, we will never really know what motivated Heinrich Toews to buy a gun and shoot his young pupils. The *Free Press* reported that Toews had ordered a repeating rifle and another revolver from a Winnipeg company, noting that "he evidently would have cleaned out the whole village" if he had got them (12 Oct. 1902). According to both the English and German-language press, Toews was clearly an evil fiend and a bloodthirsty villain. His own letters and other materials, however, provide a more complex picture. Toews appears to have been an intelligent, articulate man who suffered from chronic physical and mental afflictions for which good treatment was probably not available at that time. Plagued by his frailties and sins, his constricted existence, and his frustrations with the trustees, Toews seems to have had a psychic break ("freaked out", in current lingo), unleashing a demonic rage that had long simmered within him. The church leaders were right in perceiving that Toews was in the grip of evil forces that led him to this tragic moment.

Today, we are more likely to speak of the destructive power of mental illness than of being captive to the Evil One, but the effect is the same: we know that forces beyond one's control can drive a person to actions one could not have imagined. Only great desperation could have led this Manitoba Mennonite teacher to such a terrible deed.

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Notes

- ¹ Bernhard Toews was one of the Sommerfelder delegates who travelled to Paraguay in 1921 to arrange for the settlement of Mennonites from Manitoba. His prominent role may be the reason why the History Committee of the Menno Colony decided to publish this booklet for the colony's 75th anniversary. Bernhard died in 1927 just before he was to move to Paraguay.
- ² I inherited Susana Rempel's English reader of 1902 in which her name and the date are written twice in the flyleaf, once in pencil in a childish hand and once in pen in fine gothic script, probably by her teacher, Mr. Toews. This reader is part of the *Victorian Readers* series mandated by the province, and includes a variety of poems and stories, ranging from fairy tales to the parable of the Good Samaritan to "Lord Nelson's boyhood". Another of her textbooks from this time is a German Bible story book, *Biblische Geschichten für Schulen und Familien*, published in 1893 by the Mennonitische Verlagshandlung in Elkhart, Ind.
- ³ Bernhard Toews also kept journals about his trip to Paraguay and other events, some of which have been published. See review by John J. Friesen in *Preservings*, No. 13. See also "Bernhard Toews (1863-1927), 1921 Delegate" by Delbert F. Plett in *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada 1875-2000*. Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 2001, 108-110.
- ⁴ Edward Enns is the grandson of Anna Toews Ens, a niece of Heinrich Toews.