

Paul Toews (1940-2015)



Paul Toews, a long time professor of Mennonite and U.S. history at Fresno Pacific University and widely respected scholar of the Mennonite story in Russia, died on November 27, 2015.

My wife Marina and I intersected significantly with Paul Toews in the last two decades of his life. We shared many interests, including the recapture of the Russian Mennonite narrative. We were involved primarily in tourism but also in academic research. We covered not only the Russian-Ukrainian story but also the Flemish, Frisian, Polish and diaspora narratives. Let me borrow extensively from the obituary he himself wrote in his last weeks in November 2015. Paul and Olga were with us in the California desert shortly before his death, in the company of “The Fellowship of the Russian Mennonite Ring.” These five couples were resource leaders of the sixteen-year Mennonite Heritage Cruise.

Paul was born on 27 November 1940 to John B. and Nettie (Unruh) Toews. He grew up as the middle son with older brother John and younger brother James. If it takes a village to raise a child, it took many Mennonite Brethren (MB) villages to raise Paul and his brothers. His father, John (J.B.) Toews was an MB minister, educator and administrator. My own maternal grandfather, Jacob Lepp, ordained ‘J.B.’ in Saskatchewan. So Paul lived in numerous villages: Freeman, South Dakota; Buhler, Kansas; the MB village section of Winnipeg, Manitoba; Reedley, California; Hillsboro, Kansas; and Corn, Oklahoma. Later in life Paul hunted out and visited Mennonite villages (extinct and living) in Paraguay, Brazil, Ukraine, Russia, Indonesia, and India.

The Mennonite Brethren world provided the initial boundaries. Friends, associates and virtually all relationships of the first twenty-years were confined to this small ethno-religious people. That surely had constricting elements, but also spacious features and provided a protective barrier. The parental home was infused with MB spirituality, which Paul accepted.

In addition to teaching for forty-four years he was also Director of the Center for MB Studies in Fresno for thirty-one years and Executive Director of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission for seventeen years. Through the association with Fresno Pacific University, two special opportunities brought much meaning and texture to his life. For twenty-years he was involved in the 'Mennonite Experience in America' four-volume history project, of which he authored the fourth volume. His correspondence files are thick with exchanges with many Mennonite historians, sociologists, economists and others.

As that project ended in the mid-1990s he became the lead historian on the Mennonite Heritage Cruise between 1995 and 2010. This task brought contact with an even wider segment of Mennonite people and many in the Mennonite diaspora. This annual cruise and the retracing of the Russian Mennonite story exhilarated him. His role was transformative for some three thousand North American pilgrims who were looking for a new way to connect to their past. Earlier tours had been selectively anecdotal and rather tractarian. As part of the new wave of Mennonite historians Paul quickly developed remarkable archival literacy as archives were opened up in the post-Soviet Union era. His lectures also put the Mennonite experience into the wider Tsarist and Soviet narrative.

In 2003 Paul, under the US government Fulbright Professor Exchange program, went to teach at Zaporizhzhya National University in Ukraine for three semesters. At the end of two years there he married Olga Shmakina. They loved, laughed, traveled, worked and published together. They visited many archives across Russia and Ukraine in search of the documentary record of the Russian Mennonite story. Today Fresno Pacific has the largest collection of Soviet documents about the Mennonite story of any institution in the United States.

From 2003 on Paul lived in both the Ukrainian and North American world. These years with Olga were exceedingly rich, pleasant, satisfying and good in every respect.

Marina and I were exceedingly fortunate in connecting with Paul, both in Europe and then also in Fresno and regularly in the California desert which we called "Sanctuary."

Walter Unger, Toronto