

A People's Struggle For Survival

by Frank H. Epp

A Review

Gerald Friesen *University of Manitoba*

I recently met, along with some of my neighbors, a 75-year-old Hutterite woman who had just left her colony to live with her daughter in Winnipeg. It was obviously a big step for her but one to which she was adjusting well. During the usual formalities of introduction, she caught my last name and looked keenly at me, saying, "Friesen. Ah . . . the Mennonites are like the English. Always striving." The story is useful because it enables me to point out that, despite my name and family ties to several figures in the book, I was not raised in a Mennonite village, church or family and come to this assignment simply as an historian of western Canada and thus as an outsider—albeit a sympathetic outsider—to the topic. But the anecdote is also useful because it fits the book. Frank Epp has written a work with a mission, in my view. It is a work of striving, not in the sense of "getting ahead" but in the proper sense of the word, of "struggling" and "contending." The book has a very clear message, given its context in the history of a church and a people. Because it is akin to an "official" history, an "authorized version" of a contentious story, it is written from the inside for those within the walls of the Mennonite church. For outsiders, its message is less clear and its value therefore less evident but, nonetheless, it does make important contributions to the larger Canadian community. In these pages, I would like to examine the message of the volume within the context of the author's perspective, as I imagine it, and then to suggest some of its implications for the study both of Mennonite history in Canada and of Canadian history in general.

The first volume of this project examined a "Separated People." Its burden was to describe how Mennonites had separated from the larger societies of which they were a part and how they maintained that separateness in Canada for over a century. It emphasized the theological roots of Mennonite distinctiveness and the subsequent decisions to maintain a cultural separation and geographical isolation as well. Volume Two, as the

title suggests, argues that between 1920 and 1940 Mennonite survival was called into question. The challenges were economic and intellectual as well as political and military; they were launched by the Soviet Union, by Canada's federal and provincial governments, by the theological seminaries and by the secularism we associate with Hollywood or Hockey Night in Canada — in short with the mass advertising — mass production — mass consumption society of modern North America. In the Epilogue, Epp suggests that the struggle for survival had not been resolved by 1940: "twenty years is too short to make great or firm conclusions . . ." This was a "time of desperation . . . of diverse responses . . . of a strong determination to overcome obstacles . . . of nagging doubts." Issues as fundamental as where on the globe the Mennonite people should live and what were the founding principles of their faith were being confronted in these two decades. However, Mennonites remained in Canada and established firm communities between 1920 and 1940. So the book leaves us with the twin assertions that a "transition" was underway and that the end of the historic tradition of separation was in sight.

The organization of the book is chronological and thematic. After an introductory survey of Mennonites in Canada (a review of volume I), it discusses the rise of fundamentalist Christian thought in the twentieth century and its impact especially in Ontario. It examines at length the emigration of 6000 Mennonites to Mexico and nearly 2000 to Paraguay in the 1920s, and the arrival of about 20,000 from Russia in the same period. In two long chapters, it examines the new agencies and settlements created by this population change — the Land Settlement Board, the purchase and division of large corporate farms, the irrigation experiments, the communities in Peace River and Reesor and Yarrow — and the new congregations arising from Russlaender-Kanadier differences. One shocking episode in Canadian immigration history — the 1929-30 decision to refuse entry to 15,000 or more Mennonites who had already abandoned their homes in the Soviet Union — is examined within the larger story of the trials of Russian Mennonites in the early years of Stalin's rule. The economy of Canada's Mennonite communities in the Depression and the failure of several Mennonite economic institutions (especially two Manitoba Waisenamts) receive a full dissection. The increasing division of the Mennonite community between General Conference and Brethren and the rise of yet other movements — especially the Evangelicals and the Rudnerweider — and of new divisions in the established churches such as those among the Old Order are chronicled with precision. One entire chapter focusses upon young adults — including youth movements, bible schools, city hostels, sex education, university — and explains the debates about how young people could be retained for the faith. Another chapter examines the debate over Men-

nonite culture and especially which aspects were essential to Mennonitism, including a non-conformist lifestyle, the German language, German ethnicity, and the German language dialects (Low and Pennsylvania German). The last chapter surveys the variety of Mennonite viewpoints upon the world at the end of the two decades — the Pro-German and Nazi, the dispensationalist, the Anabaptist and the pacifist or non-resistance perspectives, in particular.

No one can deny that the story is painted upon a broad canvas. It examines events in Canada within an international context: circumstances in Russia and Mexico and Paraguay and the United States are as important in the story as are those in Canada. If some ethnic and church histories can be criticized for a narrow shortsighted approach, for not seeing the forest as they enumerate the trees, Epp cannot be faulted on this score.

The reverse criticism has also been applied to many local histories and other similar studies of small units in a larger community. This complaint customarily alleges that the author, often a professional among amateurs or an outsider invited especially for this task, has been too busy with the forest to depict the trees at all. That is, the local constituency, the distinctive variations on a theme, are said to have been lost in the generalizations. Again, Epp must be given full marks. No one can complain that this book ignores his or her community; Epp bends over backward to enumerate every settlement and every major congregational change. To put this more positively, he places almost every Canadian Mennonite community in an appropriate context and thus provides an indispensable perspective upon its place in the larger commonwealth. This is no mean feat. Indeed, I would argue that it is the first responsibility of an "official history." If ever a basic compendium of information is to be created — numbers, locations, leaders, issues and events of importance, intellectual debates — this is the place to do it. If Epp provided merely information, however, he need only have prepared a directory: indeed, lists of leaders, church addresses and approximate sizes of congregations appear in directory form in the 47 tables, 2 maps and 3 charts that accompany volume II. But Epp goes beyond the tables and charts to provide a sympathetic statement upon the intellectual and institutional context of the many Mennonite congregational "families" — to use his term — and then recovers issues such as Sunday School, chrome bumpers and women's bonnets that are easily lost with the passage of time. As an outsider, I cannot judge the accuracy of his analysis. I am impressed, however, by the careful phrasing of his discussion of every church perspective and his attempts to be neutral in language. One does sense preferences: the Old Order members can be respected for their principles but, when a neighbour's telephone be-

comes one's own line to the outside world, at the price of that neighbour's right to communion, one imagines Epp's dismay. In his treatment of the link between Canadian and American Brethren, and the Brethren's separation from the General Conference, one senses an impatience with Tabor College theology, at least as applied to Canadian Mennonite circumstances. Similarly, dispensationalism is given shorter shrift than a follower of that outlook might wish. But even in these cases where, one suspects, Epp holds another viewpoint, his treatment is sufficiently balanced to present the perspectives, if not to embrace them.

Epp's treatment of individual leaders is even more balanced. In his depiction of leaders such as David Toews and S. F. Coffman and in briefer notes on a host of secondary figures, one perceives accuracy and a confident hand. These are not eulogies but dispassionate careful judgments. To be sure, again, we sense preferences: I believe, rightly or wrongly, that Epp is warm and sympathetic toward Toews, coolly respectful toward Coffman, but surely such preferences can be expected and accepted.

The book is based upon a sound reading of the Canadian historical literature and, in particular, upon a respectable grasp of federal and prairie politics in the inter-war years. The one episode where this is required, above all, is the Russian Mennonite immigration crisis of 1929-30, which involved the King and Bennett administrations as well as the governments of the three prairie provinces. Epp is very kind to W. L. M. King. He argues that the crucial figures in Canada's decision to refuse further immigrants were Saskatchewan Premier J. T. M. Anderson and his KKK followers. This is reasonable. Nativism was strong in Saskatchewan at this time and Anderson did oppose further immigrants. More important, and this isn't as clear in the book, was the economic situation in 1929. And, too, the 1927 Dominion-Provincial Conference gave provinces much greater control over immigration policy. But Mackenzie King should be required to accept some of the responsibility for this decision. He was travelling through the West on a speaking tour when the doors to Canada were shut. His diary entry for November 5, 1929, recorded his arrival at Rosthern, Saskatchewan:

there was a large gathering of foreigners at the station all glad and ready to shake hands . . . [Bishop Toews spoke to me about 500 Russian Mennonites] who will be banished to Siberia by Russian Govt. tomorrow, wanted them admitted to Canada. Had to explain that unless they could be taken care of by families it would raise a serious problem here — did not hold out much hope, though on humanitarian grounds would liked [sic] to have been able to help.

But this is a small revision in a solid account. What should be emphasized here is that Epp's work is based upon solid research and is generally balanced in judgment.

We look to an official history to be more than an accurate record of the past. It is also, as a number of people in this room and across the country can attest, an "historical awareness" project. The process of publication is, indeed, subsidiary in the minds of some to the process of preservation. The appearance of Mennonite historical societies, newsletters and, most striking of all, well stocked archives in the last 15 years, while the volumes of the Epp history have been prepared, is surely more than coincidence.

We might add to its function as preserver of historical documents yet another role for an official history: it should also be a catalyst for further scholarship. Nothing could be as disappointing as a large volume or series of volumes gathering dust on library shelves; nothing could be as rewarding as the accumulation of small volumes and articles beside it, chipping away at its arguments, supplementing its illustrations, even displacing it entirely. It may be too early to tell whether today's Canadian Mennonite scholarship will make Epp's book obsolete but we can say, as this meeting and others like it demonstrate, that the "Mennonites in Canada" project has stimulated research and reinterpretation to an unprecedented degree. I cannot think of another group in western Canada for whom so much scholarly work has accumulated so quickly in recent years. And if the growing stream of honours and graduate students can find support for their labours, and if they maintain their denunciations of "Epp the Bourgeois" or "Epp the anti-American" or "Epp the radical" or "Epp the traditionalist" or whatever they are muttering just out of ear-shot, then fruitful dissent will be with us for a while.

In addition to its influence upon the Mennonite Community, a project such as this should affect our view of Canadian history and our approaches to historical inquiry in Canada. In these areas, as might be expected, given Epp's concern with the Mennonite family itself, the book has weaknesses as well as strengths. Its greatest virtue is that it is a fine example of historical inquiry: the depth and range of research, the international context, the balanced judgements and the extensive consultation process within the community make the preparation of the volume a model for ethnic or religious group history. But to readers and scholars outside the Mennonite tradition, the process of inquiry and the detachment of the writer will be less important (since a high quality will be demanded and assumed) than the scholarly merits and popular appeal of the book itself. The latter issue, popular appeal, need not detain us: as a popular narrative the book has obvious problems. Outside the Mennonite community, a book of this length on such a limited span will interest only specialists in the fields of church and ethnic history. We still need a brief single-volume survey of Mennonite history that relies as

much upon illustration and anecdote as upon institutional cleavages and theological debate.

The other issue, the scholarly influence of the volume, deserves greater attention. In a number of areas, Epp has discovered new material or introduced new lines of inquiry that will interest every student of Canada. First and most obvious is his discussion of the nation's attitude toward minorities within its borders. Like recent studies of Jewish, Japanese and Doukhobor history, Epp's work suggests that the Canadian record, official and unofficial, shows far less tolerance of ethnic and religious differences than we would like to believe. The rejection of Canada by many Mennonites during the 1920s and the 1929-30 immigration episode are blots on the national conscience. Second, the book provides further evidence for the argument that the late 1920s were years of serious social instability in Canada, especially in the prairie West, and that nativism was a central theme in the popular outlook. Prairie government opposition to further immigration, especially non-British immigration, when coupled with the concerns about relief expenditures, suggests just how uncertain was the prairie economic recovery from the recession of 1920-24 and how thin was the veneer of "civilization" in Canada as in other nations. A third interesting and useful contribution to Canadian scholarship concerns Canada's relations with the United States. The tension between national and continental influences in Canadian life is an old story, as diplomatic and economic and labour historians have demonstrated, but it is also a basic theme in ethnic and religious history. Epp's discussion of the Princeton school of theology and of the Brethren movement suggests that a continental perspective is indispensable for some aspects of Mennonite history. The continental perspective is also crucial for some parts of the Jewish community and for some communities of Germans and Ukrainians, so its presence in this volume is a salutary reminder of the continental axis in the experience of many ethnic groups. Fourth, Epp provides a careful sympathetic account of one of the most underrated and maligned phenomena of twentieth century thought, fundamentalism. Whether in Alberta, California, Iran or Italy, the debate between modernists and traditionalists is not as transparent as pop culture and television exposés would have us believe. Epp reminds us that the eternal debate between freedom and order, innovation and tradition, is eternal and debatable because there are insights and blind spots on both sides. Though his discussion of the fundamentalist perspective will not please everyone, it is a serious attempt to explain the roots of one strand in a complex and significant theme in twentieth century civilization. All these themes — Canadian intolerance, prairie social instability in the 1920s, religious continentalism, the power of fundamentalism and tradition — are contributions to continuing discus-

sions: Epp has settled none of them but the debates will be the richer for his contributions.

The book is huge and yet it leaves untouched many issues in the Mennonite experience between 1920 and 1940. I would like to turn to a survey of some of these themes which, with the completion of this survey, will now be accessible to Canadian scholars. The student of immigration history may seek more information on the type of people — class, education and income level — who left Russia in the 1920s. The reaction to Mennonites within the larger Canadian society has been raised in a number of places, chiefly in connection with official government policy, but a great deal more could be said. The anti-Mennonite nativism in Saskatchewan seems to have been stronger than in Manitoba, for example, and might form the subject of a special inquiry. Mennonite literature is touched upon but, aside from brief references to Arnold Dyck and several newspaper editors, is not discussed at length; sermon literature, especially, which has been used effectively in some studies, does not receive extensive treatment here. Material history, including the study of costume, architecture, household ware and furniture might reveal important insights into change in Mennonite communities. Poll by poll election analysis would provide some insight into when Mennonites commenced their involvement in electoral politics and some insight into their secular political loyalties. Surveys of court and jail records would presumably add weight to the generalization that Mennonites were law-abiding. Demographic analysis could produce a comparative ethnic perspective upon family size, marriage age and life span. Indeed; the absence of family history is one of my real disappointments. The family, as Epp emphasizes, was, next to the church, the crucial institution in the Mennonite world. How did it function? Did it change significantly in these two decades? Did parents exert great pressure upon their children to retain the faith in the face of outside influences in the other direction? How did this affect parent-child relationships? How did it influence traditional expectations for males and females? Marriage out of the faith must have become an issue in this period. Retention of language could be investigated using a combination of census and field studies, as Alan Anderson's work on the area north of Saskatoon has demonstrated. Similar quantitative techniques could result in comparative studies of adaptation to new farm technology, changes in farm size, success in crop and animal production and inter-generational transfers of property. These avenues are now being explored by other scholars — they are not just exotic fancies — and they might provide fruitful insights for all students of Canadian society.

It is easy for the armchair critic to find new approaches or topics for another scholar; it is frustrating, if you are the scholar under attack, to be

told that one might have written a different book. The obvious response is to say, "Of course — but I wrote this one." There are two reasons for raising the kind of criticism which I have just begun. First, the book is deadly serious. It is based upon printed or written primary sources almost exclusively and concentrates upon the institutional and official side of history. How pleasant it would have been to read, in the discussion of women's bonnets, a few choice comments from one of the young women who finally decided to abandon this item of traditional dress. Surely some of them are still in the area and have vivid memories of these male chauvinists who tried to maintain one last piece of "traditional" costume at the women's expense. Oral history would have provided colourful illustrations of the author's case, and also suggested the perspective of the ordinary citizen upon these debates.

My second reason for offering a list of alternate approaches arises from the first. The historical discipline in Canada and the Atlantic world has undergone significant changes in fashion in the last two decades. A determination to rediscover "daily life" or to study a "society" as a discrete entity has been at the centre of the changes. Within this shift to social history, scholars have conceived a great interest in the limited identities of class and ethnic group and in the relative autonomy of small-scale institutions. If we must study war, these scholars argue, let us look in the trenches. If we must study governments, let us look at electoral machines or public opinion. But, best of all, if we are to study a large modern community, let us look at the masses rather than the ruling elite; let us demonstrate the proud autonomous "culture" of the worker, the ethnic community, the church. These changes have occurred while the Mennonite history project has been taking shape. The fashions in the discipline have taken a new turn while Frank Epp and his committee have been formulating their questions and building their archival collections. The new social historians might claim that Epp is asking the old questions of a new topic. The focus of his history is the dominant Church figure, the newspaper editor, the Conference meeting, the international political crisis. It is not town-country relations in Hague, or old and new houses in Rosengart, or the changing nature of family politics.

One explanation for the absence of these approaches, aside from the obvious limitations of space and research time, lies in the way Epp frames the questions for the book. This is a study of "a people's struggle for survival," not of a slow steady process of assimilation. Thus, Epp's questions are organized to demonstrate how the churches splintered, how the communities spread and what were topics for debate among the committed. In other words, his work is history from the inside. What would happen if we reversed the coin and examined the story from the perspective of Mennonite adaptation to a North Atlantic, North Amer-

ican, or Canadian norm? What if Epp's questions concerned the degree of acculturation rather than the degree of distinctiveness? If my suspicion is correct, much of this new material gathered by oral history and other techniques of the new social history would illustrate accommodation to North American or North Atlantic industrial capitalism. Even in the cases where resistance was most profound, as in J. J. Siemens' brilliant campaign to establish the cooperative movement in southern Manitoba, the language and the institutions of the resistance were not purely Mennonite but rather were common to the critics of capitalism in every nation. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, as in the case of Mennonite attacks upon the trade union movement, sixteenth century Anabaptist religious principles probably kept company with twentieth century North American Board of Trade rationales in support of freedom of conscience and freedom of property. None of this new material need change Epp's conclusions. Rather, the new social history would enrich the story by showing how Mennonite reactions to the larger society were even wider in range than just the twenty variations within the church itself. And it will find an even wider audience among scholars of ethnicity, immigration and religion in modern North America.

Critics find it easy to make wide-ranging suggestions because they do not have to submit to the discipline of producing a book. Freed of the obligation to choose among a wide range of topics and illustrations, they do not have to concern themselves with the problems of thematic unity, relative significance or even word limits. It is no reflection on Frank Epp's ability or success to say that he neglected a number of alternative approaches. Instead, it seems likely that Epp made his choices about theme near the beginning of this project in 1967 and will stick with them to the end. The content of this volume has been determined by Epp's view of the needs of the Mennonite community in the last third of the twentieth century. The clues to this perspective are scattered across the first two volumes. He is writing a *national* version of Mennonite history, quite obviously, rather than a continental or global version. *Canada* provides the context because Epp is a *Canadian* Mennonite. Second, Epp's study is rooted in the rediscovery of Anabaptist theology and in the recent rewriting of three centuries of Mennonite church history. Epp emphasizes that, even in the 1930s, during a time of severe challenges to the faith and the institutions of the Mennonite people, Mennonites possessed important unifying elements: a common theological heritage, a common historical experience and a common preference for separation from the large society in which they dwelt. Though he might have concentrated exclusively upon the disunity of the Mennonite community, Epp preferred to treat it within the context of a "potential for cooperation." Thus, where

the theme of Volume I was a "A Separated People," that of Volume II is "A People's Struggle for Survival."

Epp has written a work of contention. The book is itself a contribution to the debate about Mennonite identity and Mennonite roles. The volume ends with Epp's assertion that the elements which once separated Mennonites from the large world had, by 1940, ceased to be important: geographical isolation, as in the village islands of Russia and Manitoba, was impossible. So, too, was the Church's institutional isolation; theologies such as dispensationalism and quietism were irrelevant in the new age, he contends. By 1939, however, Mennonites were still divided among themselves and were giving "mixed messages" to their children and to other Canadians. Epp argues, clearly and forcibly, that they would henceforth have to acknowledge their membership in a state, Canada, and to accept their Christian mission. Seclusion or isolation is impossible in the twentieth century, he is saying, and involvement in the world as Anabaptists — as missionaries of a peculiar sort — must commence. This book is Frank Epp's Christian witness, to use the language of the church. Its context is not that of a secular history and cannot be fully appreciated by exponents of the secular message which is buried within the new social history. Epp has accepted a different role for himself. As Herbert Butterfield would have wished, Epp has ignored the modes of recent historical schools — what Butterfield called "technical history" — while accepting their standards of accuracy and balanced judgment. He has tried to present the Christian message as it should be understood by members of the Mennonite community today.