

**In Memoriam:
George K. Epp
(1924-1997)**



**A Tribute by George Richert,
*Menno Simons College, Winnipeg, Manitoba***

The death of Dr. George K. Epp on October 25, 1997, was, in my opinion, a great loss to the community, and, particularly the larger Mennonite community. Many people knew George for a longer period of time than I did, or in a different context; this tribute to him is written from my view of George as I knew him during the last 15 years of his life.

George K. Epp had several causes (visions, dreams) which he believed in very deeply; in fact, you could say that he was passionate when he spoke about them. His own life experiences, I believe, had a hand in shaping his commitment to these causes. These life experiences include his early years in the Mennonite Colonies in southern Ukraine; his separation from his parents during the war; his years in Paraguay where he began both his teaching career and work with the Church; and the scholarly achievement of a doctorate in history.

His love of history, especially of Mennonites in Russia, was the issue which took most of his time since his retirement from Menno Simons College in 1992. His plan was to write a six-volume series: the first has been published, the second is apparently ready to be printed, the third requires some additional work

and the last three are left for others to complete. He led a number of tours to the former Soviet Union and also spent considerable time in the various archives. One of my greatest wishes would have been to be on a tour with him and walk through many of the former Mennonite villages and listen to his stories. His love of history was bound up with the people with whom he was involved and this led to a warm association with the "Aussiedler" in Germany and the Mennonites in Latin America, particularly Paraguay.

Another of his passions was Mennonite Higher Education. He was committed to the idea that Mennonites should establish a single institution of Higher Learning. He worked with others to attempt to bring about a merger of Canadian Mennonite Bible College and Mennonite Brethren Bible College in the early 1980's, but the timing was not right for such a move. His leadership in the group that came to be called "The Friends of Higher Learning" led to the establishment of *The Mennonite Studies Centre* at The University Winnipeg (1985). Later the institution was renamed Menno Simons College (1989) and George became its first president. From his obituary, you will have noted that he was a faculty member of all three of the Mennonite Colleges in Manitoba, and president of two of them: CMBC (1978-83) and Menno Simons College (1989-92). Even though his last formal job was with Menno Simons, he never lost the vision for a single institution. This vision is now closer to fruition than ever before.

Overriding his love of history and his vision for education was a deep commitment to the Church. In my opinion, it was precisely because of this commitment that he felt strongly that the full history of Mennonite peoplehood needed to be told and that Mennonite young people should have the choice of a Mennonite liberal arts college, one that would offer wide program choices, including the programs that had always been offered at the Bible Colleges. He believed that stories of a people helped them to understand their heritage, and that a church institution of higher education would allow the passing on of history from different aspects: biblical, sociological, political, anthropological, etc. He began his Church work in Paraguay as a lay minister, served a term as Pastor of the Douglas Mennonite Church in Winnipeg and was a valued speaker in many Churches.

George was also a close friend of the Hutterite Community of Manitoba. Along with this friendship he developed a concern that the persons from the Community who taught the classes in Bible and German in the schools should have some "professional" training. He instituted a program, taught at Menno Simons College on the campus of The University of Winnipeg, whereby these persons were given inservice in both teaching skills and knowledge. For each of three years, a group of 14 Hutterite teachers came to Menno Simons for a six-week program during the May/June period. This program was largely designed by George and delivered by Dorothea Kampen and himself.

His contacts in the world were legendary. The value of such contacts is illustrated in the Esau Endowment Fund. The elder Esau was a former mayor of Ekaterinoslav and his children left an estate which was divided equally between

Bethel College in Kansas and Menno Simons College. The Esau endowment fund provides scholarships and allows the College to bring in distinguished visiting professors for a year or two.

He was, of course, also instrumental in establishing the Chair of Mennonite Studies at The University of Winnipeg and held the chair temporarily until a permanent academic was found. We only need to look at the abundance of literature which has flowed from the Chair, the many symposia which have been held and the emergence of this journal to recognize the tremendous value of the Chair to our Mennonite heritage. He was also involved in the discussions to establish a Chair in German-Canadian Studies at The University of Winnipeg. Again, this was a part of his vision of education.

He was fluent in a number of languages, other than English: Ukrainian, Russian, Spanish, High and Low German; during his lengthy hospital stay, one day when I was visiting he launched into a description of something in a language I did not recognize and I said, "George, what language are you speaking?" He looked at me and chuckled, "You wouldn't understand it, it was a Baltic Slav language!" Even in his last days, he was full of surprises!

I assumed the Presidency of Menno Simons College upon George's retirement in 1992. In the continuing evolution of a new institution there are always ups and downs; during the ups, George celebrated with us and during the downs he was a constant source of enthusiastic encouragement and a great mentor.

A Tribute by Peter Letkemann, *Winnipeg, Manitoba*

George K. Epp was born on October 26, 1924, in the Mennonite village of Osterwick (Pavlovka) in the former Chortitz Settlement. His parents were Maria and Kornelius Epp. His father was a well-liked school teacher by profession and a respected lay preacher by calling. Being a teacher was a risky occupation in the new Soviet "Workers' Paradise" of the 1920s. In 1923 the Soviet government introduced laws prohibiting preachers from serving as teachers, and vice versa. While this decree was aimed primarily at the Russian Orthodox Church and its 50,000 or more church schools, it struck Mennonite communities hard as well. Kornelius Epp was unwilling to compromise his principles, and was dismissed from three successive teaching posts — in Schönwiese, Osterwick and Franzfeld — within a five-year span. The family moved from Osterwick to Franzfeld (Varvarovka) in the Yazykovo Settlement only weeks after George's birth, and for some unknown reasons George's birth was "officially" registered in Franzfeld rather than Osterwick.

George spent his difficult, yet happy childhood years in Franzfeld. He attended school in the neighbouring village of Nikolaipol, and was known for

his discipline and diligence. While most boys had enough of school after seven years and went out into the work-force, George hoped to continue his education. He was able to complete his eighth grade at the school in Neuendorf. He apparently had ambitions of working in the agricultural sector. During the summer months he worked on the collective farm.

On 21 June 1941 Germany invaded the Soviet Union and George's life changed forever. At the age of 16 he was drafted into the German *Wehrmacht* and, given his command of the German, Ukrainian and Russian languages, was assigned as language interpreter. As the German army retreated westward after 1943, George eventually ended up in southern Bavaria, where he was captured by the American army. Unlike 1.5 million other German POWs who perished in American captivity, George was lucky enough to be released shortly after the war ended. In 1947 he was among the first group of Mennonite refugees to leave Germany for Paraguay on the *Volendam*.

In the Volendam Colony he met and married Agnes Froese in 1948. Together they shared the hardships of pioneer life in a new land. The community soon recognized his teaching gifts, although he had no formal pedagogical training, and hired him to be their school teacher. After his baptism in 1950, George also began his lay ministry in the church—thus continuing a long-established family tradition.

In December 1954, George and Agnes emigrated to Canada. Within days of his arrival in Winnipeg on 20 December 1954, he was offered a job as lab assistant to Dr. Campbell in the chemistry department at the University of Manitoba. George became an accomplished glass blower, making test tubes, beakers and other glass apparatus for the lab. The complex Pyrex glass vacuum system that he built to store gases for chemistry research at the U of M still stands as a monument of sorts to his skills.

Already fluent in Russian, Ukrainian, German, and Spanish, George began studying English and taking night-school classes to complete his high school requirements. In addition to his work in the lab, George then enrolled at the University of Manitoba and earned BA and MA degrees in German. His MA thesis, entitled "Rilke und Russland" was completed in 1968 and published in 1984. In 1976 he earned his Ph.D. in history with a dissertation on "The Educational Policies of Catherine II."

George gave up his career as a glass-blower in 1968, and began a long and distinguished teaching career. He taught at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, the University of Manitoba, Canadian Mennonite Bible College, the University of Winnipeg and Menno Simons College. From 1978-83 he served as President of the Canadian Mennonite Bible College; from 1985-92 he served as Director of the Mennonite Studies Centre and helped to establish its successor—Menno Simons College. He retired from Menno Simons College in 1992, but continued his involvement with the Hutterian Heritage Teachers' Training program, where he taught church history.

In addition to his teaching duties he also served as a lay minister in the Sargeant Avenue Mennonite Church, Springfield Heights Mennonite Church

and Douglas Mennonite Church, all in Winnipeg. He also worked on many conference committees — especially the editorial advisory board to the German- Mennonite paper *Der Bote*.

George K. Epp died of cancer in Winnipeg on October 25, 1997, one day short of his 73rd birthday. He will be remembered as a man with a diverse range of interests and talents: a master glassblower, a dynamic teacher, a passionate public speaker, a capable college administrator, and a renowned scholar in various disciplines, including Anabaptist history and theology, Russian and Soviet-Mennonite history, and Mennonite literature. He was a man of courage and deep conviction, of passion, determination, discipline and sincere humility, a man of faith and vision who looked not only to the past but also to the future. Above all he was a man deeply devoted to his family and to his fellowship of faith, a sensitive pastoral counselor, and a dear friend, always ready to listen and take time for people.

A Submission by Werner Epp, *Winnipeg, Manitoba*

This prayer, by the Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, was translated from the Russian to German by my father, Dr. George Epp, two years ago. It was his wish that I read it at the end of his funeral service. Very loosely translated into English, the gist of the prayer is as follows:

O Lord! How easy it is to live with you,
how easy it is to believe in your Word.

When my thoughts torture me
and even the wisest among us don't understand
and only see the end result
and know nothing of labours into the morning hours,
then YOU are my comfort
the knowledge, that you are always near
and that not all good has been lost here on earth.

At the peak of earthly renown
I see the path that you chose
which I would surely have missed.
That strangely wondrous path, through suffering, up towards

the peak,
the path of which I, too, can now tell all humanity:
"Only Your light keeps us from giving up."
And if I am to continue
you will fill my cup.

And that which I can no longer take upon myself
You will pass on to others.