

Rebels, Exiles, and Bridge Builders: Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Campos Menonitas of Chihuahua

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The region surrounding the Campos Menonitas, the Mennonite settlements near Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, Mexico, located 450 kilometres south of the United States–Mexico border, is home to three distinct cultures: Mennonite, Mestizo (the majority ethnic and socio-linguistic group in Mexico, consisting of Spanish-speaking people of mixed race, primarily Caucasian and Indigenous heritage), and the Indigenous Rarámuri (Tarahumara) Pueblo. Their geographic convergence is why the region has become known as La Tierra de las Tres Culturas (Land of the Three Cultures).

The first Old Colony Mennonites arrived in San Antonio de Arenales (modern-day Cuauhtémoc), in the wake of the Mexican Revolution and in the midst of a tumultuous time of national reorganization. They had arrived from Canada on March 8, 1922, under terms designated by them as a *Privilegium*, which had been negotiated between six delegates from the Mennonite community and President Álvaro Obregón. Prior to the Mexican Revolution and the arrival of the Mennonites, the region surrounding San Antonio de los Arenales was populated by Mestizo tenant farmers and ranch hands (*campesinos*) who worked expansive tracts of land

owned by a few wealthy families. The most notable tract, the former Hacienda de Bustillos, owned by the Zuloaga family, was parceled and sold to the new Mennonite settlers. Campesinos from the region were recruited by Francisco “Pancho” Villa’s revolutionary fighters, and many important battles in the Mexican Revolution were fought at sites in the surrounding area, like Parral, Chihuahua, and Juárez (Domínguez, 2015). Though the initial groups of Old Colony Mennonite immigrants from Canada, numbering 7,000 by 1927, were separatist in ideology, Mennonite and Mestizo communities had contact with one another, primarily business-related, from the very beginning. Indeed, the dynamics established at that time concerning landownership and the subsequent development of large-scale agriculture and industry continue to shape relationships between the communities to this day.

As a result of the internal diaspora of Indigenous people within Mexico, Indigenous Rarámuri (Tarahumara) people have had an enduring presence in the region surrounding Cuauhtémoc, despite the fact that their ancestral homeland lies to the west in the mountainous Sierra Tarahumara and the surrounding Copper Canyon region. Economic insecurity, food shortages, and increasing narco-violence have driven indigenous Rarámuri people not only to urban centres, such as Ciudad Chihuahua or Ciudad Juárez, but also to the Campos Menonitas, to work as agricultural and industrial labourers and domestic workers. Contact between Mennonite and Rarámuri communities was initially minimal and for many years was limited to charitable donations made by Mennonite churches to Rarámuri communities in the Sierra. However, in recent years, as more and more Rarámuri migrate to the Campos seeking employment opportunities and increased security, Mennonite communities are having increased and varied encounters with members of the Rarámuri Pueblo.

In the nearly one hundred years since the arrival of Mennonites in Mexico, contact between Mennonite, Mestizo, and Rarámuri communities has increased and expanded beyond business relationships into all areas of life including education, religion, and marriage. While the depth and nature of cross-cultural experiences in the Campos Menonitas varies dramatically from community to community and individual to individual, relationships between the three cultures are a vital component of daily life in the region and will continue to evolve in the years to come.

Project Description and Methodology

The socio-cultural, linguistic, political, and economic dynamics that shape the interactions between communities in the Tres Culturas region extend far beyond the borders of Mexico into the United States and Canada, particularly as a result of the transnational migration patterns of the Mennonite community between Mexico, the United States, and Canada, as well as to other locations in Latin America such as Belize, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina, and most recently, Colombia. “Rebels, Exiles, and Bridge Builders: Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Campos Menonitas of Chihuahua,” (REBB) is an oral history project funded by the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation that sought to explore these dynamics and the unique identity and contributions of the Tres Culturas region and to highlight the long, complex history of cross-cultural interactions between Mennonite, Mestizo, and Rarámuri communities through the collection of audio recorded personal narratives.

We conducted REBB in the Tres Culturas region of Chihuahua, Mexico—with additional interviews conducted in Seminole and El Paso, Texas, and Las Cruces, New Mexico—in the spring of 2018. The project, which is housed at the Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg, is a collection of 42 audio-recorded interviews (approximately half in English and half in Spanish), transcripts, translations (for interviews that were conducted in Spanish), and donated materials that document and explore the experiences of Cuauhtémoc-area Mennonites past and present who have built relationships with the larger Mexican community. The project also recognizes the perspectives and contributions of Mestizo and Indigenous Rarámuri people who have developed close ties with the Mennonite community in the Cuauhtémoc area.

Before beginning the project, we searched for key informants in the region who had connections with influential organizations in the Mennonite communities and the surrounding areas. Some of these were the Museo Menonita (the Mennonite Museum), Chihuahua Amanece con Todos en la Comunidad Menonita (Chihuahua Dawns for Everyone in the Mennonite Community), UACJ-Cuauhtémoc (the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez-Cuauhtémoc Campus), Steinreich Bibelschule (Steinreich Bible School), Cabañas Las Bellotas (a cabin rental facility), Lebenswasser Church, and the Mexican Red Cross among others. After the initial interviews we used the snowball sampling technique to find other potential participants. All participants signed informed consent forms and received copies of their recorded interview, the

transcription of their interview, and the translation of their transcription (where required). This paper is based on these oral history transcripts.

Project Goals

The primary goals of REBB were to collect oral histories from the Campos Menonitas and the Tres Culturas region from a variety of perspectives in order to document cross-cultural interactions that occurred in previous generations, changes in cross-cultural interactions over time, and the ways cross-cultural interactions are perceived in the present. Some secondary goals of the project were to highlight existing Spanish-language research that had been produced by scholars, journalists, community members, and the government in Mexico for an English-speaking audience, to identify and address research gaps, to address negative stereotypes about the region, to connect cultural workers and researchers with existing resources inside and outside of Mexico, and to feature Mestizo and Indigenous voices in conversations about Mennonite settlement in Chihuahua.

Because Mennonite settlement in Mexico has a complex racial, socio-political, linguistic, and economic history, it was imperative to give special attention to perspectives that are often missing from narratives and scholarship about Mennonites in Mexico, particularly the voices of women, and voices from Mestizo and Indigenous communities. In addition to featuring voices from populations who are often marginalized within the Tres Culturas region, the project sought to address negative attitudes towards Mexico generally, and about the Campos Menonitas specifically, to show that the range of experiences that exist in these places go beyond stereotypes of unbending conservatism and violence.

To assist in expanding the reach and highlighting the goals of the oral history project, 30 of the 49 REBB participants (some of the 42 audio interviews were conducted in pairs) agreed to participate in the Darp Stories Project, a documentary series hosted on a YouTube channel of the same name, which showcases both full interviews and interview clips from REBB alongside the landscape photography of local artists and project participants Marcela Enns, Veronica Enns, and Raúl Ramírez Kigra. The Darp Stories Project makes selected oral histories from REBB available to a wider audience, in an open access format with a particular focus on reaching people in Old Colony–origin communities throughout the Americas. The Darp Stories Project remains available online after

the original series ran (May to December 2018), and seeks to be a place where people from the Tres Culturas region can share their stories on their own terms and in their own words as an open-access digital archive (Darp Stories Project).

Beyond Tres Culturas

Within the communities that constitute the Tierra de Tres Culturas, there is an expansive variety of experiences and identities that add even more complexity to the already diverse socio-cultural dynamics of the region and, by extension, to the REBB project. For the last half-century, Mennonites in Chihuahua, particularly in the southern colonies closest to Cuauhtémoc (as opposed to the most traditional northern colonies of Sabinal and Capulín) have demarcated themselves along increasingly denominational lines, and changes in infrastructure, technology, expected social norms, and the introduction of missionaries (both Mennonite and non-Mennonite) magnified these differences (Loewen, 2016). Several of the interviewees gave detailed accounts of the impact of excommunication on their social practices and denominational identity. Many project participants referred to the three main branches of the Mennonite church in the Campos—Old Colony, *Kleine Gemeinde*, and Conference (a general umbrella term used to describe several “less traditional” and “evangelical” Mennonite denominations)—and explored the dynamics between Mennonite communities that accompany the variety in dress, religious practices, language and educational preferences, and contact with non-Mennonites.

In addition to religiously identified Mennonites, there are people of Mennonite ethnic origin within and outside the Campos who identify as members of other Protestant denominations (most commonly the German Church of God) or as non-denominational, and as a result many of the project interviews also explore encounters between the variety of denominations and identities within the Campos and grapple with questions concerning ethnic versus religious Mennonite identity. In this paper the term “non-traditional” is used to refer to religiously identifying Mennonites who do not adhere to traditional dress standards, educational directives, or other cultural practices observed by Old Colony and *Kleine Gemeinde* communities, as well as to refer to ethnically identifying Mennonites who live in the Campos but have a denominational affiliation other than Mennonite, or have no religious affiliation.

In Mestizo and Rarámuri communities, variations in religious and cultural practices also impact intra- and inter-cultural interactions across the region. The most prominent socio-cultural dynamic observed by project participants within the Mestizo community concerned the interactions between the majority Catholic community and the minority Protestant (primarily evangelical) communities and was mentioned in several interviews. The minority Mestizo evangelical community interacted with traditional Mennonites primarily in a business capacity, and with non-traditional Mennonites in religious, social, and romantic relationships, at times collaborating with them on evangelistic and charitable projects. The Catholic majority tended to have relationships with the Mennonite community, both traditional and non-traditional, that were business-related or that involved dealings with the government or secular development organizations (with several notable exceptions recorded in the project interviews).

Among members of the Rarámuri Pueblo there were strong distinctions made by interviewees between evangelicals, their family members who practiced Catholicism, and their family members who held traditional Indigenous beliefs. Additional distinctions were also made between members of the community who still lived in the mountains and those who had migrated to towns and cities. In general, Rarámuri living in the mountains held more traditional beliefs than those who had migrated. Rarámuri evangelicals who had migrated to the Campos had the closest contact with the Mennonite community, forging religious and, to a lesser extent, social relationships with the Kleine Gemeinde community and evangelical Mennonites. Evangelical, Catholic, and traditionally Indigenous Rarámuri also related to traditional and non-traditional Mennonite communities through labour relationships. REBB sought to navigate and showcase the complexities within these communities to present an accurate representation of the diversity of experiences in the Tres Culturas region.

“We Always Lived Alongside the Mennonites”

Although the establishment of the Mexican Mennonite colonies was motivated by a separatist ideal, the reality is that cross-cultural encounters between Mennonites, Mestizos, and Rarámuri people have occurred since the Mennonites first arrived in San Antonio de Las Arenales in 1922. José Luis Domínguez, a Cuauhtémoc writer and author of *La otra historia de los Menonitas* (The other Mennonite history), spoke about his grandmother, Sixta

Molinar Hernández, who had one of the first interactions with the Mennonites:

When the Mennonites arrived on March 8th, 1922, my grandma was 12 years old. She told us about the night they arrived. None of them spoke Spanish. They communicated through gestures, but all of the Mexicans were curious about these tall blonds getting off the train. They gave out jars of fresh milk from the cows they milked on the train. My grandma was given a jar of warm milk. [It was] an encounter, an encounter between two cultures, that impacted my grandma and that she shared with me.¹

Jesús Quintana told the story of the legacy of his family's ranch in the region and the interactions that his grandfather had with the Mennonites after their arrival:

My father's family has been here in this region for generations. There's a place close to here that belonged to my father's family where there is a grave from the 1800s where my great-great-grandfather is buried. So, my father's family has always been from here. My family, my dad, since my grandfather's time had a ranch, and when the Mennonites arrived to make colonies, that ranch was in the middle. So, my grandfather had a great friendship with the Mennonites. When I was a boy, sometimes I went with my grandfather to visit Enrique Dyck. My grandfather had a great friendship with the Mennonites. He [Enrique Dyck] was the head of the colony at that time and was a neighbor of my grandfather's ranch. My father always lived alongside the Mennonites.²

In the first years after the arrival of the Mennonites, cross-cultural bridge-building was done almost exclusively by men. However, there were exceptions. Pastor Walter Remping Rico not only shared about his biracial and bicultural identity, the result of the marriage between his Mennonite father and Mestiza mother in the 1950s, but he also discussed his grandmother who arrived in Cuauhtémoc from Russia in 1926. The Mennonites who immigrated from Russia were not traditionalists and they were not accepted in the traditional Mennonite colonies; for this reason they lived in the city of Cuauhtémoc and not in the Campos Menonitas. Despite the prohibitions of the traditional colonies, Pastor Remping Rico's grandmother worked in the Russian Mennonite community, the Mestizo community, and the traditional Mennonite community, and was a bridge across cultures and between traditional and non-traditional Mennonite communities:

My grandma was a *Trajchtmoka*, a person who sets bones, a chiropractor, and midwife. So, she was very sought after, she had permission

to go to the Campos and make rounds in the Campos, there were people who received her there, but she couldn't live there.³

Despite the fact that these early interactions between Mennonites and others were less frequent and deep than they are today, they established the foundation for further cross-cultural interactions.

The Development of Mixed Family Relationships

There are many factors that contributed to the spectrum of religious expressions among Mennonite communities in Chihuahua, including the arrival of non-traditional Mennonites from Russia in 1926, the formation of less conservative communities as the result of other migrations (for example, the arrival of the *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites in the Jagüeyes Colony in 1948), the conversion of traditional communities by individuals from non-traditional Canadian Mennonite denominations and from evangelical denominations from Germany and elsewhere, and excommunication and the fracturing of traditional communities over questions of modernization (Peters, 1988). Over time, these factors have created the phenomenon of “mixed family relationships,” which is to say that nuclear and extended Mennonite family groups now often include members of different churches—both traditional and non-traditional Mennonite, as well as other Protestant (primarily evangelical) denominations—and non-religious members, and may also include Mestizos (most commonly those who are evangelical, but also, less frequently, those who are Catholic or non-religious).

At the beginning of the reconstruction and reconfiguration of traditional social structures in Chihuahua's southern colonies, these “mixed family relationships” typically were not the result of exogamy between traditional and non-traditional Mennonite groups, or inter-racial exogamy between Mestizos and Mennonites, but were the result of religious (namely evangelical) conversions and the rise in the number excommunications of people from traditional congregations, primarily over disputes concerning the industrialization of agriculture, use of vehicles, and changes to colony infrastructure (the paving of roads, the introduction of electricity, etc.). However, as time progressed, intermarriage between non-traditional Mennonite groups (intermarriage between traditional and non-traditional Mennonites was, and still is, rare), as well inter-racial exogamy between Mestizos and Mennonites, became more common. One project participant commented on the tensions and dynamics surrounding the frequency and perception of exog-

amy (both intra- and inter-racial) in her community, Colonia El Valle, and laughingly described it as being viewed as “common and unacceptable.”⁴ However, perceptions of exogamy vary from colony to colony, generally becoming more acceptable the farther south and closer to Cuauhtémoc one is.

Inter-racial exogamy in the Campos Menonitas, particularly between Mestizo evangelicals and non-traditional (mostly evangelical) Mennonites has increased dramatically in Chihuahua’s southern colonies since the 1980s, a time period that many project participants mentioned as the beginning of inter-racial marriages, beyond the few outlier cases that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Though there are notable examples in the project interviews of marriages and long-term relationships between Catholic Mestizos and non-traditional Mennonites (a category that includes people who identify as religiously and ethnically Mennonite as well as people who only identify as ethnically Mennonite), shared evangelical identity and practice was the most common factor in the formation of intimate relationships between Mestizos and Mennonites. Similarly, non-religious Mestizos and non-religious ethnically identifying Mennonites, considered outliers in their communities, expressed that a shared non-religious identity shaped the formation of their intimate relationships more than a shared cultural background.

Dan Rodríguez García argues that class carries a greater weight than shared cultural origin in the formation of intimate relationships and childrearing practices, and in much the same way, among non-traditional Mennonites and Mestizos in the Campos, a shared religious (or non-religious) identity is often what informs not just intimate relationships, but entire networks of commercial and social expressions in the Campos Menonitas that are manifestations of the multiple localizations through which all residents of the Tres Culturas region, Mennonite, Mestizo, and Rarámuri orient themselves (Rodríguez García, 2006).

The creation of mixed family relationships and exogamy between and outside Mennonite groups in the Campos has created a more open atmosphere and a greater diversity of religious and cultural experiences within Mennonite communities in the Tres Culturas region. These changes in family relationships, initially fueled by religious conversion, excommunication, and increased proximity and access to outside communities, have provoked the decentralization of the control and influence of the hierarchy of the conservative, traditional colony system, and has redefined its founding separatist identity. Today, there is profound contact between traditional and non-traditional Mennonites, and Mennonites and Mesti-

zos. Commercial, religious, social, and intimate relationships in the region have been impacted by the complex and dynamic mixed family relationships that have fundamentally challenged and reworked the foundational separatist identity of the southern Mennonite colonies in Chihuahua.

Case Studies

Excommunication was at the centre of many of the aforementioned factors contributing to changes in the Chihuahua Mennonite colonies in the last half-century, and was a catalyst in the formation of mixed family relationships, exogamy, and the restructuring of separatist dynamics within colonies. Pastor Rempening Rico discussed the friction in the community in the 1960s when he was a child:

In those years, there were problems there. That church split. I didn't know, I was young, and I wanted to make friends and it turned out that, 'You can't be our friend,' it was incredible to think that while many people couldn't make you feel small, but that there were many people who could.

Marcela Enns also spoke about her parents' excommunication from the traditional Old Colony church in 1980 for buying a truck and wearing modern clothing:

When my parents left the traditional church, my maternal grandparents no longer talked to them at all, for any reason. They weren't invited to family gatherings, nothing. But, with time everything changed. It's different now. I think that people accept more than before, if someone thinks differently.⁵

After several years, many families re-established contact with those who had been excommunicated and today there are many families with mixed religious status in the Campos Menonitas. Every southern colony in Chihuahua (Manitoba, Swift Current, Ojo de la Yegua, Jagüeyes) has had its own experience concerning technology and issues of reform, and there is variety in the relational dynamics between families with different religious affiliations. (Conflict over modernization has been experienced recently in the most traditional northern colonies, Sabinal and Capulín.) Although severe excommunications are still practiced in some communities, where the punishment is to cut off communication with the family, in general, the severity and the implications of ex-

communication have changed and there is now greater opportunity for relationships between traditional and non-traditional Mennonites. Aganetha Loewen de Quintana, a non-traditional Mennonite woman in the Manitoba Colony married to a Mestizo man, described her experiences:

Then, it was very different. But, little by little that changed. It was difficult for my parents. For example, my dad was excommunicated and couldn't sit with the others at the table to pray, he pretended to wash his hands while the others were praying; he couldn't join them. My dad had to sell his business because of the excommunication, because no one came to buy anything anymore. But, [later on], everything became more open. In those years, there were a lot of changes for my aunts and uncles as well. And my [traditional] aunt told me, "Yes, I support you," I was very surprised that she dared to say this so openly. Yes, they get along well with us, we live very well together and that she dared to express this out loud meant so much to me, and I felt that there was something very different and new here.⁶

The transition between the time of tumultuous change and reform in the Mennonite colonies and today, when there is a greater diversity of religious expression, was very difficult, and would not have been possible without the work of individuals who left the traditional church, through excommunication or by their own choice, and later returned to their communities to serve and support those who remained (Chávez Licón, A. & Islas Salinas, P. Treviso, M. O. Nevárez, et al., 2016).

Aganetha Loewen Wiens, mother of three children, nurse, and owner of a medical practice and pharmacy in the Swift Current Colony, is one of these people. She described the difficulties she endured to receive a secondary education in Rubio and a nursing certification in Chihuahua in the 1980s without the support of her family:

I went to traditional school until I was 12 years old. After that I had a three-year break. Then, I enrolled in the Campo 101 school where there was an opportunity to study more. At the end of three years there, they gave me a certificate so I would be able to enter the secondary school in Rubio. And that was a step further, another experience, very difficult, I did it practically without speaking any Spanish and all of school was in Spanish. I struggled a lot in those first months to understand the teachers. After that, I had the idea of going to Chihuahua to study nursing, I had a lot of obstacles, especially from my family. There was no economic support, nothing. Nobody supported me when I had this idea, but there was a teacher from the Campo 101 School who gave me economic support. During those years, I learned that, yes, change is possible, yes, that it's possible to live differently.⁷

She described how she got to know and then began dating her husband, a doctor at a public hospital in Cuauhtémoc, and talked about the difficulties that they faced with their families concerning their relationship and marriage. She also discussed the medical practice they opened together in a traditional community in the Ojo de la Yegua Colony, near the end of the 1980s, that was the only practice at the time that offered services in Low-German for the Mennonite community:

It was a very traditional community. When we started there, there was no highway, there wasn't any electricity. Afterwards, with the passage of time, their ideas changed and they installed electricity and started building the highway. In the practice we had a room where we attended births. The women were very isolated. I had been rejected because I left the community. But they came for medical attention. That was not rejected. They accepted that. There was no problem. Not for the births either. For any medical concern, people came. Lots and lots of people came. Those who didn't know Spanish struggled a lot to go to the doctor. For this reason, they sought us out. We had the advantage that we could communicate with them in their language.

Her husband died in 1998, but Aganetha continued to run the medical practice and the pharmacy on her own, where she continues to work to this day. She talked about these experiences and how attitudes and customs had changed in the colony over the years:

I still work here. I still do what I love and use what I learned. I have a pharmacy and I love working there and seeing people in the practice. Children are still born here, and I love attending the births. I can't really say anything has changed about the work itself because I do the way I've always done. Now, people aren't so limited by the language, so now people can choose deliberately where they want to go. In the 35–40 years since I went to school, things have improved a lot. The mentality is more open. It's not so closed anymore.

Miss Chihuahua and the Creation of the State Mennonite Resource Office

The dynamics of cross-cultural interactions between traditional and non-traditional Mennonites and the Mestizo community in the Tres Culturas region were not only influenced by individuals who forged a new life in the Campos after excommunication, but also by changes at the institutional level of Chihuahua's state government. An example of these systemic shifts was the creation of a

resource office involving both the Mennonite communities and the State of Chihuahua. Chihuahua Vive Con Los Menonitas (the government office's name from 2008 to 2016) and Chihuahua Amanece Para Todos en la Comunidad Menonita (2017–present) was created as a collaborative space to promote the well-being of everyone living in the Campos Menonitas, but with a special focus on supporting women and children in traditional communities. Katharine Renpenning, an entrepreneur from a non-traditional Russian Mennonite community and Miss Chihuahua 1987, founded the office and served as its first director at the request of then-governor José Reyes Baeza Terrazas. She spoke with REBB about her motivation to serve the Mennonite community and her desire to see more cross-cultural collaboration:

We developed all kinds of different programs: education, rural development, health, transit. It was very beautiful, but a little bit difficult. It was my first real contact with [the more traditional] community because all of my previous contact had been from afar. Many people knew that I had been Miss Chihuahua and that I was Mennonite and I felt that sometimes they saw me as both something to be admired and rejected. The people got to know me a little bit, however, during the program period. I think that we are bridge builders. In my opinion, this bridge-building is very important. This bridge-building that we do with other cultures should be taken to the next level.⁸

Cross-Cultural Collaboration in Health, Education and Community Development

In addition to the work of the Mennonite resource office supporting interactions between the Mennonite communities and the state government, there is incredible diversity in the interactions that the traditional and non-traditional communities have with Mestizo and Rarámuri communities, which have united in the work of social welfare in the health, education, and community development sectors.

This pattern can be seen in the “Mennonite Delegation” of the Mexican Red Cross. “They call us the Mennonite Delegation, but we’re from different cultures and we serve here together,” said Diego González, the Assistant Director of the Mexican Red Cross’s Campo 101 Delegation in the Swift Current Colony. He spoke more about the cross-cultural nature of the delegation:

It’s really incredible you can come into a community and be included. And this same community has confidence in you, embraces you and in-

cludes you. This has happened to me and it's beautiful that over time they've come to trust me. We know that in the Mennonite community that winning trust is everything. We've had really good communication and cross-cultural exchanges with the community. They are really sincere friendships, really beautiful friendships and they really have put a lot of effort into learning more about us. If one of us has fallen, we all work together to raise them back up. And it will continue this way into the future.⁹

In the Campo 101 Delegation, Mestizos and Mennonites, men and women, work together and are breaking stereotypes in order to serve their local community and communities nationally and internationally. Connie Penner, who comes from the *Kleine Gemeinde* community in the Jagüeyes Colony and is a paramedic in Campo 101's Mexican Red Cross delegation, was 18 years old when she was interviewed for the project. She talked about her experiences as a local and international rescue medic:

I studied in the second graduating class of paramedics here in Campo 101. I'm from Colonia Jagüeyes and I've always done things differently. I no longer follow a traditional way of life, but I attended a private *Kleine Gemeinde* school. We didn't study very much Spanish. I learned most of my Spanish from the paramedic course and from working here. It was really hard at first, but now it's much easier. I am responsible for an ambulance and I respond to emergency calls, clinical cases, and trauma cases. I had the opportunity to go to Houston with the [Mexican Red Cross] national team after Hurricane Harvey. We were a bilingual team; we gave people care in English and Spanish. It was an experience that totally changed my life.¹⁰

Connie also talked about the role of traditional women in the organization:

One day, a very traditional Mennonite woman told me in Low German, "It's so wonderful that people who speak Low German are getting this training because I can talk to you in Low German." I was very surprised because I thought that traditional women weren't allowed to receive this kind of training. But, I realized it's different because many Mennonite women take the paramedic training course. Right now there are around 20 women who are certified paramedics. And there's another group, *Las Damas Voluntarias de la Cruz Roja* (The Lady Volunteers of the Mexican Red Cross). They don't work in the ambulance, but they do a lot of work to support us. They help us with cleaning and collecting donations. They host food sales to help us raise money. When there were earthquakes in central Mexico recently, these women organized the donations and fundraising. They are very generous, and we feel very supported by them.

In the Campo 101 Delegation there is space for all, men and women, traditional and non-traditional, those who speak Spanish and those who do not, to serve the community in the way they want to and to feel comfortable. Traditional women bring their domestic labour and their capacity for constructing support networks to a public place for the well-being of everyone. In this way, they are supported by their communities to participate in public life, where in other cases it would not be permitted or would be viewed poorly. While in the past, female paramedics came from communities that were less traditional, now there are more traditional women who receive training at the Campo 101 Delegation, and first aid workshops and courses are offered in Low German to men and women in traditional communities. The relational solidarity between men and women, traditional and non-traditional Mennonites, Mestizos, and Indigenous people at the Campo 101 Delegation of the Mexican Red Cross builds bridges of opportunity and facilitates more cross-cultural encounters through community work and service.

Relationships between traditional and non-traditional Mennonite communities extend also to co-labourers in the Mestizo community. Diana Sandoval, a Spanish teacher in a SEP (Secretaría de Educación Pública) (Department of Public Education) incorporated school in Campo 38½, in the traditional Ojo de la Yegua Colony, described her experiences living and working in the Campos Menonitas for 20 years as a Spanish teacher. She talked about the origins of her connections with the Mennonite community through Templo Ebenezer, a non-traditional Mennonite church in Cuauhtémoc:

I went to a Mennonite church for the first time when I was 17 years old, that's when I had my first contact with them. I started going to the church, the pastor was Mennonite and his wife was Mestiza. This was my first contact with the Mennonites, but they spoke Spanish and had been raised in Mexico. The church in Campo 67, in a Mennonite community, was asking for a Mestiza teacher, but with a Mennonite faith who wanted to work in the community to teach Spanish. They invited me to come teach for a year and I accepted. It was the first time I had direct contact with the traditional Mennonite community, because my encounters before had been with more open Mennonites with a different lifestyle. In Campo 67 the community was very traditional. So I began working as a teacher, I lived in a house with the pastor of the church and his wife.¹¹

She also discussed the tensions between the non-traditional and traditional communities, the changes that had occurred in the

community during her time as a teacher, and about her desire to serve as a bridge builder between cultures:

It was difficult, the non-traditional community was the one who brought me to work there, but I lived in the traditional community. For them it was difficult for them to see and live alongside a Mestiza in the community. Maybe because I dressed differently I drew their attention. They also were a little afraid because they were faced with something unknown and they didn't know who I was or what I was going to teach the children, but little by little there were changes; I came for one year and I stayed for twenty. One of the things that I felt most passionate about was that they would be able to see that Mestizo culture is different than the picture that they've always had in their minds. I fell in love with Mennonite culture.

Though members of the bilingual Pueblo Rarámuri Spanish school have been in the region since the founding of San Antonio de los Arenales, in recent years, many people from the Rarámuri Pueblo have come from the Sierra Tarahumara to the Campos Menonitas to look for work and improved living conditions. One of these families was the Ramos-Bustillos family who left their home in the Sierra in 2010. When they arrived they did not anticipate the strong relationships that they would cultivate with the Mennonite community and how the work of a traditional Mennonite woman, Maria Wiebe, and her fellow women from a local church would impact their lives.

Bruno Ramos Rivas and his wife Alicia Bustillos González spoke to the project about their migration experiences and about their work as the director and teacher, respectively, in a bilingual Rarámuri/Spanish school, funded by a Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite congregation and founded by Maria Wiebe in Colonia Manitoba. Bruno described their migration:

We're from Guachochi. We've been living here [in the Campos Menonitas] with the family for around 10 years. I came to find work, to look for a better life. I came looking for work and well, I started working here with a builder, with Mr. Pedro Fehr, and I did that for 6 years.¹²

When they arrived they noticed the lack of educational opportunities for Rarámuri children in the Campos:

When we arrived here we saw a lot of children in the street, morning, noon and night. These children didn't have a home, they didn't have a school, they didn't have anything. They had to dig around a bit to get things started. Jacobo's wife [Maria Wiebe] started the school. So I will always be thankful for the seed she planted.

Peter Rempel, a member of Ministerio de Amor's school board and director of a private Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite school, described the school's origins in more detail:

This project was started by the wife of the pastor of our church, Jacobo Enns. She saw that the Tarahumaras had arrived in the Campos Menonitas and didn't have the opportunity to go to school because there was no school. So, she started it with some friends of hers from the church one day in 2011. More children started coming. After that they built this building, with support of the pastor, and moved everything here.¹³

Bruno and Alicia discussed how they became involved with the school:

Thankfully, we met Pastor Jacobo Enns, he invited us to work in the school. There were 28, 30 students, all Tarahumara. They came from Bocoyna, Guachochi and Carichi. These students, were and still are, children of people who work for Mennonite businesses. So there was a concern that these children weren't receiving any education. And now, we have been working at the school for three years, very happily, because it gives [us] the opportunity to help [our] people.

They also discussed the school's cultural and pedagogical vision, which has full cultural and academic autonomy in its organization:

It is really important to be Tarahumara and to feel Tarahumara. Because there are many young people who are Tarahumara, but don't feel Tarahumara, they want to take out the Tarahumara in themselves. So I talked with the committee here at the school and I said, "When you hire a teacher here, they should be Tarahumara and feel Tarahumara. They should love their culture and their people. Because any other way won't help." It's happened in many places, where at times, our culture and our people have been denied. Having Tarahumara teachers teaching Tarahumara children is a huge advantage because they identify with each other. The children are more trusting and have better communication because the teacher understands the Tarahumara culture. I know how they think, how they live, and why they do certain things because I grew up in the Sierra Tarahumara. That is the benefit of having Tarahumara teachers, the communication. And everything I just mentioned, it's the same for the parents as well. They identify with each other and have more trust, if there's a problem, a need, they come with total confidence. The Tarahumara family is what moves us.

Alicia described her experiences in the public school system in the Sierra and her motivation for adopting a bilingual Rarámuri/Spanish educational model:

I remember that I didn't speak Spanish. I started speaking it when I was 13 or 14 years old. And I still don't speak it well. But, here I am. It is always difficult [for a Rarámuri child] to understand and study in a school because they always teach the classes in Spanish. You understand very little and many times the Tarahumara culture doesn't advance very much in academic knowledge because it is always taught in Spanish. So, up to this point, that has been my experience of school. So, when I find myself with a child who is suffering through this, I remember my childhood and I say, "I believe that what is happening to them is what happened to me.

In the 2017–2018 school year, Ministerio de Amor served 40 students, preschool through sixth grade, employed six Rarámuri teachers, and received their official certification from the Department of Education. Bruno and Alicia anticipate that the school will continue growing because of the increased migration to the Campos from the Sierra and they hope to serve students through the end of secondary school in the near future. Though the current school is different from what Maria Wiebe started in 2011, the spirit of service and the collaborative values remain as a testimony of bridge-building across cultures in the Tres Culturas region.

Conclusion

At the entrance of Álvaro Obregón, a Mestizo community 40 kilometers north of Cuauhtémoc located on the border of the Manitoba, Swift Current, and Ojo de la Yegua colonies, known by its nickname "Rubio," there is a hand painted sign that reads, "Rubio, Tierra del Trabajo" (Rubio, Land of Work). Though the Mennonite, Mestizo and Rarámuri communities have distinct histories, economic circumstances, and socio-political dynamics that informed their arrival in the Tres Culturas region and their current experiences, the promise of work and a better living has attracted and motivated all of them. Many project participants expressed hopes that cross-cultural interactions in the community would continue to grow and deepen and would foster openness and exchange between communities. While some participants embraced the hybridization of food, language, and other socio-cultural markers, other participants expressed a strong desire to maintain their cultural identity, whether that was Mennonite identity, Mestizo identity, or Indigenous identity. As the centennial of Mennonite settlement approaches, all communities in the Tres Culturas region continue to explore and wrestle with the challenges of preserving their cultural identities while still making strides to develop relationships

with other communities in order to improve life for everyone in the Tres Culturas region.

REBB continues to contribute to scholarly inquiry and cross-cultural collaboration in the Campos Menonitas of Chihuahua through strategic partnerships with the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez–Cauhtémoc campus, the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, the Mennonite Heritage Archives, Raul Kigra Photography, Marcela Enns Photography, Verónica Enns Ceramics, and the Instituto de Cultura del Municipio de Chihuahua (Chihuahua's Municipal Institute of Culture). Scholarly and popular articles in English and Spanish, the Darp Stories YouTube channel, and the promotion and networking of Mexican Mennonite, Mestizo, and Rarámuri artists and scholars document and interrogate the complex dynamics of life in the transnational, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic, Tres Culturas region. These efforts, concerning Low German-speaking communities, transnational migrant communities, and minority religious communities, centre perspectives that have traditionally been underrepresented and offer to further an anthropology of Mennonite and Latin American cultures.

Notes

- ¹ Interview by Abigail Carl-Klassen [ACK], Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, February 26, 2018. Transcripts of all interviews quoted in this paper are located at the Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.
- ² Interview by ACK, Campo 22 Manitoba Colony, Chihuahua, March 16, 2018.
- ³ Interview by ACK, Campo 2A, Manitoba Colony, March 16, 2018.
- ⁴ Interview by ACK of T. Berg, Las Cruces, New Mexico, January 13, 2018.
- ⁵ Interview by ACK, Campo 10, Manitoba Colony, February 6, 2018.
- ⁶ Interview by ACK, Campo 22, Manitoba Colony, March 16, 2018.
- ⁷ Interview by ACK, Campo 101, Swift Current Colony, Chihuahua, March 7, 2018.
- ⁸ Interview by ACK, Ciudad Chihuahua, March 23, 2018.
- ⁹ Interview by ACK, Campo 101, Swift Current Colony, Chihuahua, February 15, 2018.
- ¹⁰ Interview by ACK, Campo 101, Swift Current Colony, February 14, 2018.
- ¹¹ Interview by ACK, Campo 38½, Ojo de la Yegua Colony, Chihuahua, February 19, 2018.
- ¹² Interview by ACK, Campo 14, Manitoba Colony, March 31, 2018.
- ¹³ Interview by ACK, Campo 14, Manitoba Colony, March 29, 2018.

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