

# Foreword

The Mennonite emigration from Canada in response to compulsory English language education began in 1922 as the first train departed from Plum Coulee, Manitoba, bound for Chihuahua, Mexico. Two years later, Saskatchewan Mennonites would settle in the neighbouring state of Durango. By 1926, a new wave of Mennonite migrants were en route to the Paraguayan Chaco. Together, the roughly eight thousand Latin America-bound Mennonites of that decade constitute the largest group emigration in Canadian history. Yet, rather than a single period of departure, the 1920s migration is perhaps best understood as an unfolding act of uninterrupted mobility continuing into the present. In addition to the well-known chronology of successive settlement (initially in Mexico, Paraguay, Belize, Bolivia, and Argentina, more recently in Peru and Colombia, and currently in Suriname), Mennonites also expanded *within* nations—e.g., from Chihuahua and Durango to Zacatecas, Coahuila, Quintana Roo, and Campeche in Mexico. Families and individuals moved through these networks (a veritable “village *among* nations” as Royden Loewen evocatively termed it) as they routinely departed for Canada and, subsequently, returned to new locales within the Latin American Mennonite matrix. Latter groups, such as the Russlaender and Kleine Gemeinde migrants to Mexico and Paraguay, found their presence inextricably linked to that of the 1920s settlers.

This traditionalist, Low German-speaking Mennonite community has long drawn scholarly and popular interest within and beyond the Mennonite diaspora. Journalists, photographers, anthropologists, novelists, children’s authors, travellers, and state officials are among the many who have offered their interpretations. Consensus has been rare. Assessments range from quasi-romanticized to laudatory to condemnatory—with many gradients in between. This

issue of *JMS* enters that contested terrain. In our *JMS* Forum, articles by Hannes Kalisch, Abigail Carl-Klassen, Doreen Helen Klassen, Emma Hoebens, and Patricia Islas Salinas speak to the past and present of the 1920s Mennonites. In distinct ways, each author brings new perspectives to the study of Mennonite history in Latin America by engaging past academic scholarship, community self-representation, and popular discourse.

We begin with a unique series of tributes to one of our authors. Hannes Kalisch passed away in the summer of 2023, shortly after completing his contribution to this issue. Through his co-authored oral history work with Ernesto Unruh of the Enlhet community in the central Chaco, Hannes dedicated himself to the recovery and preservation of Indigenous history and language. In this roundtable memorial we hear from several voices: retired Filadelfia, Paraguay, archivist Gundolf Niebuhr, who provides an overview of Hannes's life in an obituary that originally appeared in *Mennoblatt*; Ernesto Unruh's son Lanto'oy' Unruh, member of Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet, a centre dedicated to the growth of the Enlhet language; Canadian-Paraguayan artist Miriam Rudolph, who drew inspiration from Hannes's work; and book editor Richard Ratzlaff, whose press (McGill-Queens University Press) published the first English translation of Hannes's work.

Following these tributes, our *JMS* Forum opens with Hannes. Consistent with his lifework, he challenges persistent settler narratives of the Enlhet-Mennonite encounter and calls on readers to consider the incursion of Russian and Canadian Mennonites into Enlhet territory from an Indigenous perspective. As Hannes argues, the Enlhet concept of *nengelaasekhammalhkoo* (reciprocity, sharing, and kinship) was refigured in the Mennonite view as one of acquiescence or surrender.

Women's voices have often been silenced in the writing of Mennonite history. This is especially true of the history of the 1920s migrants, owing to the tendency of authors to focus on land delegations, state-level negotiations, and market-oriented agricultural production. Authors Doreen Helen Klassen and Abigail Carl-Klassen employ participant observation, interviews, and oral history with Low German Mennonite women to offer far more than a "mere corrective" to this omission. Demonstrating a sensitivity to the relations between environmental history and migration, Doreen Klassen highlights the many adaptations that women made in terms of labour, diet, dress, and church membership as they moved from arid northern Mexico to tropical Belize. She also locates one element of women's decision-making power in the practice of matrilocality that persisted within patriarchal structures. Carl-Klassen is attentive to

another arena of women's authority in her presentation of oral histories of midwives who have always been "at the centre of community life." Notably, her treatment of maternal care opens points of intersection with Indigenous and mestizo communities in the *campos menonitas* of northern Mexico.

Carl-Klassen's approach is also reflected in the following article by Patricia Islas Salinas. Islas examines the shared intercultural space occupied by three groups within the region around Ciudad Cuauhtémoc. Her work draws on interviews with Indigenous Rarámuri migrants from the nearby Sierra Tarahumara, Mennonite settlers, and mestizo residents of the region. She considers how each group constructs space, maintains elements of identity, and engages in labour regimes within a rapidly growing agro-industrial area proclaimed, in state and municipal discourse, as a tri-cultural region. Where the expanding urban footprint of Cuauhtémoc intersects with the commercial corridor bisecting the boundaries of Manitoba and Swift Current colonies, community symbolic representations are simultaneously projected and eroded. The work should invite comparisons with other spaces of intercultural encounter in the context of dependent, and often precarious, labour relations, including the greenhouse complex of Leamington-Wheatley-Kingsville in southwestern Ontario and the rapidly growing urban footprint of Filadelfia and Loma Plata in the central Chaco.

In his published memoir, Bishop Isaak Dyck wrote of his community's resistance to public English schooling in the 1920s, clarifying that it "was not the language but the fact that it was impossible for us to allow our children to be raised under the flag and under the enthusiastic expression of military zeal." He knew that "the school of today represents the church of tomorrow."<sup>1</sup> This realization is something explored in the final article in our Forum. Emma Hoebens writes about Old Colony schools in the Mennonite colony of Salamanca in the southern Mexican state of Quintana Roo. Though the Old Colony school system, due to its limited curriculum and ages of attendance, has often been treated critically by outsiders, Hoebens is attentive, like Bishop Dyck, to its effectiveness in reproducing community through the centuries. "School," she writes, "is not only part of community life; it is organized to vindicate community life." Its capacity for socialization is also evident in the seamless transnational and intercolony migration that is typical of Latin American Mennonites.

Before our regular slate of book reviews, we conclude with two research papers. The first fits well with the themes explored in this issue. Blake Hamm takes a *longue durée* view of Mennonite migration. He shifts away from the ethnographic focus of our JMS Forum

to explore the geopolitical considerations that led various states throughout Europe and the Americas to accept Mennonites and grant them privileges. The second article, by Joanne Moyer, Julia Gesshe, and Harry Spaling, is a focused consideration of how the concept of sustainability has appeared in *Canadian Mennonite* throughout the early twenty-first century. The authors find Mennonites engaging the concept of sustainability in numerous ways, from discussions of climate change to relations with Indigenous peoples and critiques of consumer culture. Though not its focus, reading this article alongside those in the JMS Forum may spur reflection on how future authors can consider the environmental impact of the 1920s Mennonite settlers. Through intensive farming on Indigenous lands, they have altered landscapes in a variety of ecosystems (high desert, dry forest, tropical jungle) that are increasingly precarious due to climate change. Though these practices have caught the attention of journalists writing for major periodicals (*The Guardian*, *The New York Times*) related scholarship in Mennonite studies remains limited.

We hope you draw inspiration from this issue of JMS! We greatly appreciate our subscribers and donors. I also wish to conclude my remarks by thanking our editorial team and staff that makes the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* happen, including our book review editors, managing editor, copy editors, contributing authors, and peer reviewers.

Our next issue will include select peer reviewed papers drawn from the July 2023 conference “The Russlaender Mennonites: War, Dislocation, and New Beginnings.”

Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, Editor

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Isaak M. Dyck, “The Mennonite Emigration from Canada to Mexico,” trans. Robyn Sneath, *Preservings*, no. 44 (Spring 2022): 34