

# Echoes of Drumbeats: The Movement of Exuberance Among the Mennonite Brethren

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In 1860 a group of eighteen men signed a document stating that they no longer wished to belong to the dead church of the Russian Mennonites and instead intended to establish an independent church which was to be composed of truly converted believers.<sup>1</sup> While the secession and the early development of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) group were accompanied by hardships and even persecution by the old-church members and Mennonite public officials, the early MBs were so elated about their freedom and new life, that they began to express their joy in hitherto unknown ways. At their religious gatherings they sang lively songs according to popular secular tunes. They were noisy; they shouted, and then leaped for joy. They expressed their oneness in Christ by being intimate with one another. All those who opposed their antinomian behaviour were not only criticized but also excluded from their fellowship. In this paper on the *Fröhliche Richtung* (movement of exuberance) I wish to analyze the origins, expressions and some of the consequences of this phenomenon in Russian-Mennonite history, beginning with some observations on Mennonite historiography on the subject.

This so-called movement of exuberance was not just a passing fancy or slight aberration among a few misguided and fanatically-inclined individuals. It was a manifestation and even a doctrine promoted and defended by the leadership of the early MB Church. That later MB writers and historians considered the movement important, dangerous, and no doubt embarrassing, is borne out by the amount of space they devoted to it in their writings. Peter Martin Friesen in his *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, assigns some fifty pages to the documents and comments concerning the *Fröhliche Richtung*, approximately 5% of his massive history.<sup>2</sup> Abram H. Unruh in a chapter concerning "The Inner Danger" of

the early MB Church, devotes twenty-six pages to the movement, concluding with five pages of "lessons" learned from the unfortunate phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> And John A. Toews, in a chapter entitled "Faith in Ferment," is somewhat apologetic about the manifestation of exuberance and "false freedom" among the early MBs, agreeing with Unruh that the "lessons from history ought to be carefully heeded when movements similar to the *Fröhliche Richtung* appear within church circles in the present day."<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the interest in the movement of exuberance among MB writers, non-MB commentators and historians have treated the movement rather lightly, sketching its main outlines briefly within the context of early Mennonite Brethren development. While some early documents record opposition to the young MB Church, there are others which express good-will toward the intentions of the Brethren. For example, a group of old church leaders, visiting an MB gathering in the home of Abram Peters of Ladekop have left the following report: "Their first song was accompanied by a harmonica and violin, but not in an unrestrained manner . . ."<sup>5</sup> Jacob Bekker who preached on that occasion emphasized especially that the duty of a Christian was to "forsake evil and strive after the good . . . The group warned against secret sins, specifically naming the vice of onanism."<sup>6</sup> The visiting leaders came away convinced that the negative reports concerning the Brethren were either without foundation or at least exaggerated.<sup>7</sup> Franz Isaac in his *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (1908) defends the exuberants and includes documents sympathetic to the early MBs.<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Goerz in his *Die Molotschnaer Ansiedlung* devotes about a page and a half to the "schwärmerische Auswüchse in der Brüdergemeinde," stating that it was only a vocal minority that had been influenced by Wüst and his doctrine of free grace and that the movement was overcome in the first few years.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary non-MB writers, rather than gloat over the weaknesses of the early MBs, often express sorrow and disappointment over their eccentric behaviour.<sup>10</sup> Thus while non-MBs have shown consideration and indulgence toward the excesses of the early Brethren, there is evidence that the movement of exuberance discredited the Mennonite Brethren Church for some time to come.

As indicated, the movement of exuberance among the early Mennonite Brethren had its origin in the Eduard Wüst circle prior to the establishment of the MB Church in 1860. Wüst, who died in 1859, was not only a dynamic and emotional Lutheran-Pietist preacher but also a convincing teacher advocating vivid expressions of joy with regard to God's forgiveness and gracious acceptance of sinners. Those who followed Wüst included Mennonites in the Molotschna who began to express their new-found joy and freedom by hand clapping, shouting, and leaping and dancing, justifying their actions on the basis that David also danced for joy before the Lord. According to one writer: "When they met for

edification they sang and jumped, beat on boxes and chests on which they placed pots and cutlery to increase the noise."<sup>11</sup>

The movement of exuberance was represented by a dominant and vocal minority to be sure, but this minority included several high-ranking leaders of the Mennonite Brethren. Men like Wilhelm Bartel, Benjamin Becker and Gerhard Wieler not only defended and promoted joyousness but they also advocated what others considered to be a "false freedom," claiming that Christians led by the Holy Spirit could no longer sin. Jacob Bekker, one of the eighteen who signed the MB document of secession and chronicler of the origin of the MB Church, also sympathized with this freedom movement for some time. He explains in his *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* that the "sister kiss" originated with the Molokan brethren who visited the early MBs and greeted them according to their custom with a kiss. The Mennonite women who at first were reluctant to be kissed by these bearded men, eventually agreed to the practice and "began to greet our brethren with a kiss under the guise of innocence and humility . . . Thus after the 'sister kiss' became more general it did not remain completely innocent."<sup>12</sup> In another reference to the origin of the "sister kiss" Bekker writes: "[Mennonite] husbands followed the Russian custom of frequently beating their wives whenever they would not keep quiet. Because the newly converted sisters had an intense love for the brethren who had delivered them from spiritual distress, they were so overcome that at their gatherings they also greeted the brethren with the kiss of peace. This became a practice among them for some time."<sup>13</sup>

The noise and freedom among the MBs soon took on other forms of attitude and behaviour. Benjamin Becker and Gerhard Wieler assumed for themselves the titles of "Apostles" and as such took it upon themselves to legislate moral behaviour among the faithful. Worldly persons were to be avoided, not even greeted when met on the street, and those who opposed them were excommunicated. The fanaticism of the leaders included iconoclasm of the most primitive kind. Religious and devotional books which were considered less than truly Christian, were destroyed and burned. Among these books were Friedrich Starke's *Prayerbook*, Arndt's *True Christianity*, and Hofacker's *Sermons*, reading materials formerly read and enjoyed by all Mennonites. Only the Bible was considered necessary and sufficient for the Christian life. At one bookburning ceremony, Gerhard Wieler stepped forward, held the Bible high, and shouted: "This book . . . is the only book which shows us the way to salvation. All other books cannot help in this regard and must therefore be destroyed and burned according to Acts 19:19."<sup>14</sup>

The excesses of the Molotschna enthusiasts came to Einlage in Chortitza through Gerhard Wieler and others. Young women were not allowed to appear in public without head-coverings, not even at wed-

dings. This gave other Mennonites occasion to ridicule them. Pictures and wall mottos were proscribed and burned; even pictures in Christian books were destroyed.<sup>15</sup> Gerhard Wieler and Benjamin Becker, calling themselves apostles and vying for greatness, went so far as to pronounce the ban upon one another. They were, however, soon reconciled and thus continued to exercise their despotism jointly.<sup>16</sup>

It is surprising that this movement of exuberance could find expression among traditionally conservative and somewhat stiff, certainly by and large sober, Mennonites. How is this to be explained? The influence of Wüst and the example of the "joyous" among his followers, as has been mentioned, had given impetus to the movement among the Mennonite Brethren. While a certain measure of antinomianism is to be found in many religious revival movements, the manifestation among the early Brethren might never have occurred had it not been for certain radical individuals inclined to accept and disseminate such beliefs. Friesen holds certain unstable persons responsible for the excessive exuberance and "false freedom" among the early Mennonite Brethren, singling out especially Wilhelm Bartel who had been a devoted follower of the joyous in Wüst's circle. According to Friesen, Bartel was intelligent and musically gifted, but he was not well educated nor spiritually mature.<sup>17</sup> In fact, nearly all the leaders of the movement were narrow-minded and intolerant individuals who knew little if any church history or had ever read a serious book on theology. According to Friesen, the only positive thing about them was that "they did have warm blood and healthy nerves."<sup>18</sup> There were, however, other men, otherwise responsible individuals, who carried the idea of free grace and emotional exuberance to an extreme. Among those caught up in the movement were Jacob Bekker, who was one of the first to baptize by immersion, and Johann Claassen, one of the outstanding early leaders among the MBs. Friesen, in fact, expresses surprise that Claassen was so lenient toward these aberrations, and sat on the fence, as it were, until the matter got out of hand.<sup>19</sup>

Those who opposed the movement of exuberance — at least the extreme form and its accompanying fanaticism and despotism — were persons like Jacob Reimer, Heinrich Hubert, Katharina Claassen, Johann Claassen's wife, and eventually Johann Claassen as well. However, the realization that the movement reflected negatively upon the MB Church dawned upon these persons only gradually. Here are just a few descriptions of responses to the unorthodox behaviour in the MB church services. In 1861 Jacob Bekker wrote to Johann Claassen in St. Petersburg: "The Lord has done great things for us . . . Sunday we were so lively that the Brethren leaped and danced . . . Wilhelm Bartel was with us and we sang outside before the door, giving thanks and shouting for joy with one another. And the world shouted back at us . . . It gathered at the street fence and listened . . . Bartel went out to preach the gospel to them."<sup>20</sup>

Jacob Reimer of Gnadenfeld and Katharina Claassen represented the opposite side. In June of the same year, Reimer wrote to Claassen: "I will no longer tolerate such bedlam in my house as took place last Sunday . . . in my shed."<sup>21</sup> And Katharina Claassen wrote to her husband: In a vacant Nogai mosque "several leaped and danced, some played and sang, and then almost all of them shouted for joy. Occasionally someone prayed, but the rest did not become quiet, hardly anything could be understood . . . this appears sinful to me."<sup>22</sup> Abraham Unger of Einlage wrote in 1862 that he was weeping over the "immoral, insipid way of life, in conflict with all orderliness."<sup>23</sup> He adds: "Let us not prepare [Christ] any more shame through this extreme emotionalism."<sup>24</sup>

On June 18, 1861, Johann Claassen, who was in Petersburg at this time, was still fairly lenient toward the drummers and leapers. He himself felt like shouting for joy at times.<sup>25</sup> He suggested that all be allowed a "free conscience" — both the happy ones and the more rationally inclined individuals should believe and behave according to the leading of the spirit.<sup>26</sup> But there was very little, if any, freedom of conscience. Instead, a "spiritual despotism," as Friesen calls it, developed as a result of the exuberants' behaviour. Led by such men as Benjamin Becker, Bernhard Penner and Gerhard Wieler, "the teaching consisted of merciless condemnation and mockery of every personal conviction culminating in the feared 'ban', in which dissenters were 'delivered over to Satan'."<sup>27</sup> As late as 1864 Jacob Reimer was excommunicated by the free ones because he had opposed them; these "free ones" then tried to sow seeds of discord in Reimer's family so as to alienate him from his wife and children.<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Becker also threatened with excommunication those persons in the Kuban who opposed the movement, including Johann Claassen himself.<sup>29</sup>

How did members of the old church view the movement of exuberance? According to the official documents of the early MBs, including the history of Friesen, the new church was met with hostility from the beginning. It had to assert its spirituality, independence and freedom in opposition to the rest of the Mennonite Brotherhood. According to the official MB accounts the old church refused to tolerate genuine piety and personal devotion. It is also well known that prominent elders and ministers of the old church not only refused to acknowledge the new movement but tried all they could to hinder its development,<sup>30</sup> even though many of them had to admit that the spiritual life of Mennonites in mid-19th-century Russia was at a low ebb.<sup>31</sup> For example, the poems and songs of Bernhard Harder, a prominent minister and evangelist in the old church, express a deep concern with regard to the religious indifference and lack of spirituality among the Mennonites of Russia.<sup>32</sup> It thus comes as no surprise that the early Mennonite Brethren evoked considerable sympathy and initial goodwill among ministers and lay persons of the old

church.<sup>33</sup> It is significant, however, that the first doubts and suspicions with regard to the new movement arose in connection with the excessive exuberance among the MBs and despotism of some leading Brethren.

Some of the contemporary chroniclers express sadness when writing on this subject. They had at first hoped that these newly converted persons would become the catalyst for the reformation of the old church. One Hildebrandt writes: "Father especially rejoiced with the newly converted, who so openly declared the assurance of forgiveness of sin in the blood of Jesus, and hoped that these people would become the salt of the church and be a great blessing to it. He even viewed their initial, rather loudly expressed joy in their newly experienced forgiveness as scriptural. At first he was kindly disposed to the movement and extended to it every sympathy and friendly good wishes."<sup>34</sup> However, this sympathy toward the early MBs changed first to disappointment and then to opposition when concerned old church members found that the "pious ones" distanced themselves from the brotherhood, manifested a holier-than-thou attitude, and "were not careful about several human weaknesses during their initial exuberant feelings of happiness," advancing the notion that "the sins of the flesh were not imputed to a child of God."<sup>35</sup> The "revived ones" did not want to be led by the old church leaders, nor accept counsel from those who wished them well.<sup>36</sup> Even married leading ministers were fairly free with members of the opposite sex, and did not hesitate to exchange the "sister kiss" with single women. Hildebrandt writes concerning this in his journal: "It became noticeable that Johann Loewen, the leader of the [early Brethren] and a married man at that, found much to do in the kitchen and exchanged the 'sister kiss' with the single sisters working there. Naturally, father, who was very strict in ethical questions, could not reconcile this with the 'new life,' and his enthusiasm for the movement was considerably dampened."<sup>37</sup> Hildebrandt continues: "Loewen's behaviour finally caused so much offense that they had to excommunicate him. Some of our people rejoiced about this in a somewhat unchristian manner. The other side, however, should have admitted that they as the 'converted' could still sin, which they refused to admit in their discussions with my father."<sup>38</sup> There were other MB members who lapsed morally, were disciplined, and self-righteously excommunicated before the "false freedom" movement was brought to an end.

The movement of exuberance was overcome in stages. The so-called "false freedom" doctrine was condemned by the entire MB church by the end of 1862 and the excessive expressions of joy, including the noise, tambourines and dances, were brought to a halt during the reform measures undertaken in June, 1865. In Einlage, Chortitza, the excesses came to an end through the efforts of Johann Claassen. In the fall of 1865 the congregation came together to confess that the "frenzy and dancing" and the despotism over dissenters and unbelievers had been wrong.<sup>39</sup>

Friesen assures his readers that when he joined the MB Church in 1866 there was nothing left that resembled the aberrations of the previous years.<sup>40</sup>

The reforms undertaken in June, 1865, included the following resolutions: No individual minister "may excommunicate or carry out church actions alone or with a select group of members."<sup>41</sup> Consequently, the arbitrary excommunications of Jacob Reimer and others were revoked. "The wild expressions of joy, such as dancing, were unanimously declared as not pleasing to the Lord; the drum . . . was not to be used any longer since it had caused much offence."<sup>42</sup> "The cordial and friendly treatment of non-members was declared as pleasing to God."<sup>43</sup> The delegates were also pleased to find that the "doctrine of freedom" had not had any adherents in the church "for three years and that those who had been guilty of adhering to it had repented."<sup>44</sup>

It may be significant to note that at the June 1865 meetings such things as greeting outsiders with a kiss and expressions of joy were not categorically condemned. They were considered neither good nor bad, but given the culture of Mennonites and the temperament and practices of individuals, members were encouraged to remain sensitive to others and in all things be led by the Spirit of God.<sup>45</sup>

In conclusion, the following observations with regard to the movement of exuberance may be in order.

My essay confirms John B. Toews' findings that while there was considerable opposition to the emergence of the MB Church in 1860, there was also widespread sympathy for the concerns and actions of the early Brethren. It was the teaching of freedom, the excessive expressions of joy and happiness, and the fanaticism and despotism of some leading Brethren which turned a number of old church members against the new movement.

Contrary to some views, the movement of exuberance, with all its accompanying aspects, was not just an aberration and fringe phenomenon in the early MB Church, but a fairly deep-rooted belief and practise among leading Mennonite Brethren. Attempts to rid the young church of the *Fröhliche Richtung* were accompanied by much soul-searching, struggle, agony, and even separation on the part of individuals and congregations.

The emotionalism, fanaticism and despotism evident among the early Mennonite Brethren reflect in a sense on the maturity of the leaders and members of the young church. Friesen observes that the official pronouncements and statements of the early MB leaders were free of childishness and religious nonsense which often came to the fore in their informal settings and congregational activities.<sup>46</sup> While this is no doubt true, one nevertheless wonders whether the decision to condemn the larger Mennonite brotherhood and to establish a separate church was

based primarily on well considered reasons, good-will and spiritual considerations. The break was at least in part the result of impatience and rashness.

There is no doubt that the early excesses not only sobered the MB Church after 1865 but also caused a certain reaction in its further development. P. M. Friesen states: ". . . after this event the M.B. Church . . . in Russia and North America became more like the *Kleine Gemeinde*," that is, it became more puritanical, somewhat melancholic, and certainly more "Mennonite" in temperament.<sup>47</sup> Friesen adds: "For example, with respect to music there is not one church amongst fifty M.B. congregations in Russia that uses music in the regular services . . ." <sup>48</sup>

The movement of exuberance symbolizes the openness of the early MB Church to foreign, non-Mennonite, influences. The emphasis on the free grace of God and expressions of joy came initially from contacts with Lutheran-Pietist circles. The use of the tambourine and the noise and dancing were justified on the basis of Old Testament practices, not on the New Testament which was the traditional Mennonite court of appeal in matters of faith and life. And the "sister kiss" was borrowed from non-Mennonite believers, the Molokans, and was justified by an unorthodox interpretation of Christian freedom. Add to this the new form of baptism — immersion — which resulted from studying Baptist literature on the subject,<sup>49</sup> and one should not be surprised that some old church members wondered whether the new church was still Mennonite.

Mennonite Brethren intolerance toward other Mennonites continued after the "mad years" and the June Reforms. From 1863 on "no converted Mennonite could participate in the communion service unless he was baptized by immersion, and after 1865 it was the accepted practice."<sup>50</sup> It was only after 1900, through the efforts of men such as P. M. Friesen, that an ever-increasing number amongst the MB Church "began to practice a more extended communion fellowship — with believers of the Mennonite Church as well as with members of confessions who do not require believer's baptism."<sup>51</sup>

Both A. H. Unruh and John A. Toews suggest that "lukewarmness and coldness" in the old church contributed to the "hyperemotional movement" among the early Brethren. Toews writes: "If worship services do not provide for meaningful participation of members, they will look for greener pastures elsewhere . . . The whole schism in the Mennonite Brotherhood could have been avoided by a radical renewal in the large churches."<sup>52</sup>



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For the document of secession of January 6, 1860, see Franz Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte derselben* (Halbstadt, Taurien: Kommissionsverlag und Druck von H. J. Braun, 1908), pp. 174-176; Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*. Trans. from the German (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), pp. 230-232.

<sup>2</sup>Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 262-279; 325-327; 416-453.

<sup>3</sup>A. H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde 1860-1954* (Hillsboro, Kansas: The General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, 1955), pp. 108-134.

<sup>4</sup>John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup>Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas: The Mennonite Brethren Historical Society, 1973), p. 94.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* See also Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 392.

<sup>8</sup>Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten*, pp. 176-207.

<sup>9</sup>H. Goerz, *Die Molotschnaer Ansiedlung. Entstehung, Entwicklung und Untergang* (Steinbach, Manitoba: Echo-Verlag, 1950-51), pp. 80-81.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, the translated sources in John B. Toews, ed. and trans., "The Early Mennonite Brethren: Some Outside Views," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, LVIII (April 1984), pp. 83-124. See also John B. Toews, "Brethren and Old Church Relations in Pre-World War I Russia: Setting the Stage for Canada," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 2, 1984, pp. 42-59.

<sup>11</sup>Kornelius Hildebrandt, *Aus der Kronsweider Erweckungszeit*, in John B. Toews, "The Early Mennonite Brethren," p. 100.

<sup>12</sup>Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup>John B. Toews, "The Early Mennonite Brethren," p. 100.

<sup>15</sup>Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 325.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 268-270.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 268-269.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 416-419.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 419-424.

<sup>30</sup>See, for example, Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten*, pp. 176-189.

<sup>31</sup>See Jacob Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 17-34; Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten*, pp. 205-207.

<sup>32</sup>Bernhard Harder, *Geistliche Lieder und Gelegenheitsgedichte* (Hamburg: Verlagsanstalt und Druckerei A.-G., 1888), pp. 1188-1204.

<sup>33</sup>See John B. Toews, "The Early Mennonite Brethren," pp. 83-124.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>39</sup>Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 326.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.* Friesen adds: "In contrast to this, the Mennonite Church at Gnadenfeld — once the mother church but now the strong opponent of the M.B. Church — has placed an organ in its sanctuary — probably the only (?) Mennonite church in Russia to own one."

<sup>49</sup>Bekker, *Origin*, p. 70-73; 178-182.

<sup>50</sup>Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 458.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.* See also David H. Epp, *Die Chortitzer Mennoniten* (1889), pp. 108-113.

<sup>52</sup>John A. Toews, *A History*, pp. 67-68. See also Pastor Dobbert's account in Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 384-393.

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