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Russian Mennonite Choral Conductors: **Medley of Opportunities in the New World**

by Peter Letkemann

Photos courtesy of Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Mennonites in Tsarist Russia enjoyed a period of unprecedented economic prosperity and cultural achievements. Choirs could be found in Mennonite communities throughout the vast Russian Empire, and choral singing formed an integral part of the fabric of Mennonite social and religious life. Little did anyone realize that this fabric would be torn asunder within twenty years by war and revolution. Yet there were those who seemed to sense the coming tragedy and left Russia in the years prior to World War I for a new life in North America. Among these were three of the most influential Mennonite choral conductors in Russia during the years 1890 to

1910, who all ended up, curiously enough, in California. They were Wilhelm Peter Neufeld, Aron Gerhard Sawatzky and Kornelius Gerhard Neufeld.



**Wilhelm Peter Neufeld
(1854/56?–1923)**

The first to arrive in California was Wilhelm Peter Neufeld, a respected and esteemed teacher, minister and choral conductor, who had spent thirty years teaching in Mennonite secondary schools in Gnadenfeld and Halb-

stadt. His departure for America in 1911 came as something of a surprise to many who knew him. His colleague in Halbstadt, Benjamin H. Unruh, recalled that "W.P. Neufeld ... suddenly left Russia a few years before the beginning of the War and justified his step in a detailed discussion in his farewell sermon ... apparently the revolution which shook the Russian Empire in 1905-1907 made him sense further, more powerful crises in the offing."¹ Subsequent events in Russia were to prove Neufeld correct, and eight years later he would return to a much different Russia to offer aid and comfort to his beleaguered fellow Mennonite believers.

Neufeld was born on 1/12 November 1854 (1856?), while his

father, Peter Jacob Neufeld (1823-1909) was studying and working in Odessa.² In 1857 Peter Neufeld returned to the Molochna Settlement with his young family to take up a teaching position at the private school of Peter Schmidt on his Steinbach estate. Young Wilhelm probably received his early

“...choral singing formed an integral part of the fabric of Mennonite social and religious life.”

education from his father here at the estate school. This school was unique in its international and inter-confessional nature, since both German and Russian, Mennonite and non-Mennonite students were accepted.

In the fall of 1866, after nine years in Steinbach, the Neufeld family moved to Halbstadt, where father Peter devoted himself to his new hobby of photography. He became the first professional photographer and later, in 1887, the first printer among Mennonites in Russia. Peter Neufeld sold his printing establishment in 1903 to Heinrich Braun and Abram Kroeker, who renamed it “Raduga Press.”³

Meanwhile, Wilhelm continued his studies at the Halbstadt Secondary School [*Zentralschule*] in preparation for a teaching ca-

reer of his own. He was baptized at the age of 18 into the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church.

After a short term as village school teacher, Wilhelm traveled to Germany and enrolled at the Missionary Training School in Barmen in 1877.⁴ He seems to have completed the regular four-year program of studies in three years, since his final ordination exam took place on 23 August 1880.⁵ That same year, Wilhelm married Ida Schlenkey (a non-Mennonite), who died in 1893. The newlyweds did not return to Russia immediately; instead Wilhelm spent another year in Germany enrolled as a guest student of the Teacher Training Seminar in Neuwied.⁶

After his return to Russia, Neufeld served as Director and teacher of German, Religion and Singing at the Gnadenfeld Secondary School from 1881–1898. The school offered a three-year program of instruction, and Neufeld’s copy of the curriculum plan⁷ for the school year 1884/85 shows him teaching thirty fifty-five-minute periods a week from Monday to Saturday: twelve periods of religious studies and eighteen periods of German instruction. In addition, he conducted the school choir, which rehearsed twice a week and included students from all grades.

Soon after his return to Gnadenfeld in 1881, Neufeld was ordained as a minister in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church. He also took over as conduc-

tor of the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church choir, which had the longest tradition of choral singing of any Mennonite community in Russia. Already in the 1840s, Neufeld’s grandfather, *Ältester* Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, had conducted the choir as part of the annual Missions Festival sponsored by the church.⁸

Under Neufeld’s leadership the Gnadenfeld choir grew to be one of the largest and most respected of all Mennonite choirs in Russia. On 29 May 1894 Neufeld and the Gnadenfeld Choir were the only non-Mennonite Brethren choir invited to participate in

“Under Neufeld’s leadership the Gnadenfeld choir grew to be one of the...most respected Mennonite choirs in Russia.”

the Rückenau *Sängerfest*, the second such choral festival ever held among Russian Mennonites.⁹ The guest conductor on this occasion, Friedrich Schweiger from Poland, singled out the choirs from Gnadenfeld and Friedensfeld for praise: “as far as pronunciation is concerned, [these choirs] were exemplary, and one could see that the listeners were much more attentive to them.”¹⁰

Endnotes

1. B.H. Unruh, “The Background and Causes of the Flight of the Mennonites from Russia in 1929,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 4 (October 1930): 267.
2. Biographical information on Peter Jakob Neufeld is found in the tribute, written most likely by his son Wilhelm, published in *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch*, 1910, 78-91. Biographical information on Wilhelm Neufeld is found in his obituary, *Mennonitische Rund-*

schau, 4 July 1923, 1; his age at death is given here as 68 years 6 months and 25 days – making his birthday on 12 November 1854. In the official records of the Barmen *Missionsschule*, [RMG 200, “Absolventen des Missionsseminars, 1828-1968,” 25v], where Neufeld is listed as student no. 269, his date of birth is given as 1/12 November 1856. Thus, he was born on 1 November according to the old Julian calendar in

use in Russia at the time, which would have been 12 November according to the Gregorian calendar in use in Europe. The discrepancy on the year of his birth (1854? or 1856?) remains unanswered. The archival records of the *Missionsschule* are found in its successor organization, “Vereinte Evangelische Mission” in Wuppertal, Germany: <http://www.vemission.org/index.html>. I am grateful to the archi-

Schweiger does not name the choral selections sung that day, but the anthems sung by the Gnadenfeld choir may well have been selected from the unique repertoire represented in Neufeld's choral anthology, *Festgesänge für hohe Zeiten in Kirche und Haus, vi-*

"All editions [of Neufeld's Choralbuch] were published in Ziffern notation."

erstimmige Lieder für gemischten Chor, gesammelt von W.N. und J.R., Gnadenfeld, published that same year. Neufeld's assistant editor was Johannes Gustav Rempel, music teacher at the Gnadenfeld Mädchenschule, who served for several decades as organist of the Gnadenfeld Church.¹¹

The anthology *Fest-Gesänge* (1894) contained twenty-three larger works for the Lenten and Easter season; a second volume, with twenty-five compositions—'For Advent, Christmas, New Years and Birthday Celebrations, Songs of Praise and Songs of Repentance'—was published in 1897. Major composers represented included G. F. Handel, Louis Spohr, Johann Michael Haydn and Franz Joseph Haydn.

Volume 2 of *Fest-Gesänge* also contains a motet by Neufeld himself, a setting of Psalm 51 entitled, "Gott sei mir gnädig". Another

composition by Neufeld, a wedding motet, "Willst du mit diesem Manne zieh'n" was published in *Liederperlen* in 1906. An unpublished "Choralmottete" based on Psalm 147, written for the golden wedding anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Gustav Rempel, his second wife's parents, has also survived.¹²

In 1898 Neufeld accepted a position as teacher of religion at the Halbstadt Secondary School and Pedagogical Seminar, where he served until his departure for America in 1911. During these years in Halbstadt, Neufeld published five textbooks for religion, German and music instruction:¹³

- 1) *Biblische Geschichte für Mennonitische Elementarschulen* [Biblical Stories for Mennonites Elementary Schools], von Wilhelm Neufeld, Kornelius Unruh und Kornelius Wiens (Halbstadt, n.d.; 2. edition 1911);
- 2) *Leitfaden für den Religionsunterricht in den mennonitischen Centralschulen Russlands*, [Textbook for Religious Instruction in Mennonite Secondary Schools] von K. Unruh und W. Neufeld. (Halbstadt, 1899, 2. edition 1906);
- 3) *Ausführliches Wörterverzeichnis nach der neuen Schorthographie* [A Detailed Word-Index According to the New (German) Orthography for Schools], von Wilhelm Neufeld (Halbstadt, n.d.);
- 4) *Russkije Pessni, 3- and 4-stimmig, für gemischte oder gleich-*

"[Sawatsky] has the distinction of being the most prolific of all Mennonite composers both in Russia and North America."

artige Chöre in Zentral- und Mädchen-Schulen, [Russian Songs in three and four parts for Mixed or Equal voice choirs in Secondary and Girls' Schools], Halbstadt, 1896;

- 5) W. P. Neufeld und Peter Dueck, *Gesangschule zum systematischen Unterricht im Ziffernsingen* [Systematic Instruction Book for Singing According to Numbers], Halbstadt, n.d.

Neufeld's best-known publication was probably the *Choralbuch dem neuen mennonitischen Gesangbuche entsprechend*, edited by Wilhelm Neufeld and Kornelius Wiens (his colleague in Halbstadt) in conjunction with the new Mennonite *Gesangbuch* published in 1892. The first edition of the *Choralbuch* was published in 1897; a second edition appeared in 1902, a third in 1910. All editions were published in *Ziffern* notation. The third edition, however, also appeared in staff notation—the first book of its kind to be published by Russian Mennonites. After

vist, Wolfgang Apelt, for his generous assistance in locating these materials.
3. Ken Reddig, "Mennonite Publishing in Russia: The Raduga Press of Halbstadt," *Mennonite Historian* 13/1 (March 1987): 1-2.
4. The obituary of Wilhelm P. Neufeld in *Mennonitische Rundschau* Vol. 46, No. 27 (4 July 1923), gives the dates of his study in Barmen incorrectly as 1874-1879. Official school records

in the archive of the Missionsschule [RMG 200, "Absolventen des Missionsseminars, 1828-1968," p. 25v] give 7 October 1877 as the date of his enrollment.

5. The detailed "Protokol" of the examination is found in RMG 254, Nr. 320/00, 486.

6. P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 1789-1910* (Fresno, Calif.: General Conference of Menno-

nite Brethren Churches, 1978), §339, 737-38.

7. GAOO (State Archive of Odessa Oblast), Fond 89, opis 1, delo 1978: part of the "Peter Braun Archive."

8. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, §49, 101-102.

9. Wesley Berg, *From Russia with Music: A Study of the Mennonite Choral Singing Tradition in Canada* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1985), 22-23.

Neufeld and Family had left for California in 1911, Max Pohl, music instructor at the *Kommerzschule*

“Most of Sawatzky’s works fall either into the ‘Chorlied’ or ‘Gospel Hymn’ category.”

in Halbstadt, published an extensive critique of the Neufeld-Wiens *Choralbuch*—in both the *Ziffern* and the Note version. The storm of controversy lasted until 1914 and prompted the publication of a new *Choralbuch* in 1914.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Neufeld and his family had settled in Reedley, California, where Neufeld taught German at a local Mennonite school, but seems to have had no involvement in musical matters.

In the next few years he received numerous requests from interested Mennonites in Russia, asking for information on migration to America. He responded with a five-part article entitled: *“Tue ich gut, nach Kalifornien zu gehen?”*¹⁵

After the upheaval of the Russian Revolution and in the midst of the ensuing Civil War, Neufeld set out in July 1919 with M. B. Fast on a journey to visit Mennonites in Siberia, deliver much needed clothing, assess their needs and plan for further assistance.¹⁶ On the return journey from Russia to Germany,

he suffered from severe intestinal pain, which later was diagnosed as intestinal cancer. Neufeld died on 7 June 1923, at age sixty-eight.¹⁷ A memorial service in his honor—with the participation of representatives from both the *Kirchengemeinde* and the Mennonite Brethren Conference—was held in the Halbstadt Mennonite Church on 22 July 1923.¹⁸



Aron Gerhard Sawatzky (1871-1935)

The next to arrive in California was Aron Gerhard Sawatzky, who moved from Aberdeen, Saskatchewan, to Lodi, California, in 1920. He has the distinction of being the most prolific of all Mennonite composers both in Russia and North America, with over one hundred songs to his credit—songs that span the entire forty years of his active musical ministry.

Sawatzky was born in the village of Andreasfeld (about twenty kilometers east of Zaporozhe, Ukraine) on 24 May 1871, the first son of Gerhard Sawatzky and his second wife Maria Lepp. He was baptized in 1883 at the age of twelve, and received into the Mennonite Brethren Church by his grandfather, *Ältester* Aron Lepp. On 19 September 1891 Aron was

married to Elizabeth Wilhelm Niessen. The young couple must have settled in Andreasfeld, because two years later Sawatzky was elected as conductor of the local Mennonite Brethren choir.¹⁹

Nothing is known about his schooling or early musical training. He wrote: “Music came easy for me, and since I had been active in band music for eight years, I was elected choir director at the age of 22.”²⁰ That same year, on 29 May 1893, he and his choir travelled to Rückenau—site of the Mennonite Brethren “mother” church, to participate in the first *Sängerfest* ever held by Mennonites in Russia.²¹ In 1894 he and his choir participated in the second Rückenau *Sängerfest*, under guest conductor Friedrich Schweiger (Poland), the head of the Russian Choral Section of the *Christlicher Sängerbund*.²²

The year 1894 and the meet-

“[Sawatzky] helped organize and lead the first Sängerfest in Saskatchewan.”

ing with Schweiger were to prove a turning point in Sawatzky’s life. Several months later Sawatzky was sent by his choir to study further with Schweiger in Poland. Later the same year, Sawatzky and Bernhard B. Dück organized the first conductors’ workshop for

10. Friedrich Schweiger, “Ein Besuch unter den Sängern in Russland,” *Zionsbote*, 26 September 1894, 2-3.

11. The Gnadenfeld church was the only Russian Mennonite church with a pipe organ, which was installed about 1895), Peter Letkemann, “The Hymnody and Choral Music of Mennonites in Russia, 1789-1915” (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1985), 481, fn. 82; Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*,

§356, 773.

12. These compositions are discussed in Letkemann, “The Hymnody and Choral Music of Mennonites in Russia,” 465-66.

13. The first editions of these textbooks were published by his father, Peter Neufeld, in Halbstadt; later editions were published by his successor H. J. Braun (Raduga Press). The first two can be found in various Men-

nonite archives. No copies of the last three seem to have survived: items 3) and 4) are advertised on the last page of the 2nd edition of the Neufeld-Wiens *Choralbuch* (1902). According to J. P. Claszen, *Mennonite Encyclopedia* [ME] 4, 1139, the Russian song book was published in 1896. Item 5), the *Gesangschule*, is referred to in the article, “Etwas über Gesang,” *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 10 July 1901, 4.

Russian Mennonite conductors.²³ Sawatzky remained active as conductor and workshop leader, and also as one of the first composers in the Russian Mennonite community until his departure for Canada in 1903.

Sawatzky's activity as a composer of choral music grew out of the ongoing need to provide amateur choirs with an appropriate, yet simple song repertoire. The seven compositions known to have been written by him in Russia are found in volumes four and five of *Liederperlen*.²⁴ Many more compositions by Sawatzky are found in his two songbooks: *Sänger-Bote*, published in 1915, and *Lieder-Quelle*, published in California in 1930.

Most of Sawatzky's works fall either into the "Chorlied" or "gospel hymn" category. The latter are distinguished from the "Chorlieder" by their use of marked dotted rhythms, the refrain, and the echo technique in the refrain (having the tenor and bass voices echo the soprano and alto voices)—characteristics common to the American gospel song. About half of his ninety-four known songs fall into this "gospel" category.

About 1900, shortly before leaving Russia, Sawatzky published an instructional booklet entitled *Gesangschule in Noten und Ziffern für christliche Sänger und Dirigenten*. This booklet grew out of his own experience as conductor and workshop leader, and provided amateur Mennonite conduc-

"...the Sänger-Bote journal had not appeared since the New Year because it had been forbidden by the Canadian censor."

tors and singers with a brief but comprehensive comparison of the *Ziffernsystem* with staff notation. One of the reasons such a comparison was needed was to assist Mennonite singers and conductors in transcribing choral music from notes to *Ziffern*. Sawatzky also provided instructions on conducting patterns and choral training techniques, drawn mostly from Ernst Gebhardt's *Gesangschule*. No publication date is given, but it must have appeared before 1901, when it was discussed in an article in the newspaper *Mennonitische Rundschau*.²⁵

Why Sawatzky and his family emigrated to Canada is not known. Like his two colleagues, he may also have had a sense of foreboding; or he may have been an "economic" migrant looking for new opportunities and farming land of his own in the New World. In any case, Sawatzky and his family settled in Aberdeen, Saskatchewan, in 1903.

Sawatzky's reputation as workshop leader followed him

across the Atlantic and two years later, he wrote, "I received an invitation from the churches to begin a study of Church music."²⁶ Within the next two decades, Sawatzky was instrumental in organizing and leading choral festivals and conductors' workshops in Mennonite Brethren communities throughout Western Canada and the American Midwest.

Just as Sawatzky had participated in the first *Sängerfest* in Russia twelve years earlier (1893), in 1905 he helped to organize and lead the first *Sängerfest* in Saskatchewan. The following year, under Sawatzky's guidance, Mennonite Brethren choirs and conductors in Western Canada organized the Northern Choral Association of the Mennonite Brethren Church in North America.²⁷ The annual conductors' workshops and choral festivals sponsored by this association provided inspiration and periodic instruction for many amateur Mennonite Brethren choir directors in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. For some, however, this was not enough, and they expressed a need for more regular instruction and contact. The association members therefore asked Sawatzky to publish a monthly choral journal, to provide them with instruction, inspiration and an ongoing supply of new choral repertoire. The first installment of this *Sänger-Bote*, appeared on 15 April 1911 and continued monthly for almost seven years, until late 1918.

14. Details on the Neufeld-Wiens *Choralbuch* are discussed in Letkemann, "The Hymnody and Choral Music of Mennonites in Russia," 332-340; the controversy is discussed in Peter Letkemann, "Music in Russia: A Mennonite *Choralbuch* Rediscovered," *Mennonite Historian* 20, No. 4 (December 1994): 1-2.

15. Wilhelm Neufeld, "Tue ich gut, nach Kalifornien zu gehen?" *Friedens-*

stimme, No. 45 (12 June 1913): 5-6, and four subsequent editions.

16. Wilhelm Neufeld, "Was ich in Sibirien gefunden und ausgerichtet habe," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 25 Feb 1920, 3-4; 3 Mar, 3; 10 Mar, 3; 17 Mar, 3; 31 Mar, 3; 21 Apr, 5; 28 Apr, 2; 12 May, 4; 19 May, 4.

17. Margaretha (Rempel) Neufeld, "Bericht über das Abscheiden von Br. W.P. Neufeld," *Mennonitische Rund-*

schau, 25 July 1923, 11-12.

18. A. K. [Abram Klassen], "Eine Gedenkfeier in Halbstadt Süd-Russland, für Br. W.P. Neufeld," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 14 Nov 1923, 2-3; see also A.K. [Abram Kröker], "Prediger W.P. Neufeld in Reedley, Calif., gestorben," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 8 July 1923, 11-12.

19. This information is taken from Sawatzky's own autobiography; Cen-

“When he came to California, Aron Sawatzky was already well known to Mennonite choir leaders...”

The songs that appeared in the journal were later collected into a songbook with the same name: *Sänger-Bote: Ein Liederbuch für Kirche und Haus* (1915). The book went through several editions between 1915 and 1920; the last edition [ca. 1920] contained 172 songs with notes, plus an additional seventy texts. Of these 172 songs, seventy were written by Sawatzky himself. Another twenty-six were written by other Mennonite composers, with names such as Barkmann, Bargaen, Dyck, Enns, Klassen, Loewen, Siemens, Schroeder and Thiessen.

At the fifteenth annual meeting of the Northern Choral Association, held in Hepburn, Saskatchewan, on 25 June 1919, Sawatzky reported that the *Sänger-Bote* journal had not appeared since the New Year because it had been forbidden by the Canadian censor. The journal was written in German, and Canada was at war with Germany.²⁸

Sawatzky may have felt disheartened, or he may have felt the call of a new and better future in California—in any case, this was

to be his last meeting with members of the Northern District Choral Association. In 1920 he and his family moved to Lodi, California; a year later to Livingston (1921); two years later to Shafter, where they lived only four months (1923); back to Lodi for two years (1923-1925); and finally to Winton (1925-1935). In 1929 Sawatzky was elected leading minister of the Winton Mennonite Brethren Church. He had begun his preaching ministry years earlier in Aberdeen, Saskatchewan, in 1912.

When he came to California, Aron Sawatzky was already well known to Mennonite choir leaders and choirs there through the monthly *Sänger-Bote*. He soon became involved in leading workshops and song festivals. Numerous articles in the *Zionsbote* attest to his ongoing musical and spiritual ministry.²⁹

Recognizing the constant and ongoing need of Mennonite Brethren choirs for new songs, he undertook the publication in 1929 of another quarterly journal, entitled *Lieder-Quelle*. By the end of 1930 he had published eight booklets containing sixty-five “mostly new” songs with notes (fifteen were reprinted from the earlier *Sänger-Bote*), about as many song texts without notes, and several dozen dramatic readings for use in worship services. About half of the songs in this collection were written by Sawatzky himself.

His last known song—“*Ich weiss von einem Heim so schön*”

[“I know of a heavenly home so dear”] was written on 11 July 1935, just months before his death in Shafter, California, on 17 November 1935, at age sixty-four.³⁰



Kornelius Gerhard Neufeld (1871-1946)

The last Russian Mennonite conductor to come to North America prior to World War I was Kornelius Gerhard Neufeld. Although not related to Wilhelm P. Neufeld, Kornelius, like Wilhelm, may also have observed the political turmoil in Russia in the years after the 1905 Revolution, sensed something of the coming tragedy of war and revolution, and decided it was better to leave Russia for a new life in America.

Kornelius G. Neufeld was born 25 February 1871 in Alexanderkrone (Molochna) to Gerhard and Anna (Wall) Neufeld.³¹ He attended the village school in Alexanderkrone, 1877-1884, and went on to study at the secondary school in Orloff, 1885-1888, where his teachers would have been Kornelius Benjamin Unruh and Johann Joh. Bräul. After graduation from secondary school, Kornelius spent another two years, 1889-1891, at a private school in Kharkov, improving his Russian

ter for Mennonite Brethren Studies (Fresno), Record Group M38, file 2. 20. Ibid.

21. Peter Letkemann, “The First Sängerkonferenz,” *Mennonite Historian* 32, No. 1 (March 2006): 4-5.

22. Berg, *From Russia with Music*, 22-23; Peter Letkemann, “The Christlicher Sängerbund and Mennonite Choral Singing in Russia,” *Mennonite Life* 41, no. 4 (Dec 1986): 4-10.

23. Aron Sawatzky, “Von meiner Reise nach Polen,” *Zionsbote* (24 April 1895): 2-3; Berg, *From Russia with Music*, 23-24.

24. For more information on the Russian Mennonite choral anthology *Liederperlen*, see Letkemann, “The Hymnody and Choral Music of Mennonites in Russia,” 429-434.

25. Cited in “Etwas über Gesang,” *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 10 July 1901,

4.

26. Aron Sawatzky, “Autobiography,” written in Winton, California, in July 1934.

27. Berg, *From Russia with Music*, 48-52. Details can be found in the official ‘Protokollbuch’ [Minute Book] of the association (Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, B276).

28. “Protokollbuch der Nördlichen Sängervereinigung der Mennoniten Brüder Ge-

language skills. After completing his studies in Kharkov, Neufeld taught from 1892-1894 (1895?) at the Secondary School in Neu-Schönsee, Zagradovka settlement. When and how he received his musical training is not known. In 1895 he married Maria Friesen.³²

According to various sources, Neufeld spent the next two years, 1895-1897, studying at the Evangelical Preachers' School in Basel and the University of Basel. It is also stated that Neufeld spent another two years (1905-1907) abroad studying at Spurgeon's Pastor's College in London and at other schools of higher learning in Germany and Austria. Yet a study of school records in Basel shows no evidence of his attendance, or at least not of his official enroll-

"...Neufeld was hired by the Mennonites of Davlekanovo to establish the first co-educational secondary school among Mennonites in Russia."

ment in the school. Similarly, a check of the records of Spurgeon's College by Helmut Huebert also turned up no evidence of his enrollment there. It may be that he

only attended classes as an auditor or "guest" student.³³

Following his return from Europe in 1897 (or 1898?), Neufeld was invited to teach German and Religion at the Mennonite school in Davlekanovo (Ufa). In addition, he also conducted the choir of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Davlekanovo.³⁴

In 1902, Neufeld moved to Lugowsk (Neu Samara Settlement) to take up a position at the school there, and remained until 1905. He was ordained as a minister of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Lugowsk.³⁵

During the years 1905-1907 Neufeld again went abroad for studies. Huebert writes: "Wherever he went he also took in musical performances. He heard cathedral choirs in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Berlin and Rome. He listened to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Basel and Mendelssohn's *St. Paul* in Dresden. According to his own account, the most memorable experience, however, was hearing Handel's *Messiah* performed by a four thousand-voice choir at the Crystal Palace in London in May of 1906."³⁶

After his return from abroad in 1907, Neufeld was hired by the Mennonites of Davlekanovo to establish the first co-educational secondary school among Mennonites in Russia. The school officially opened in 1908 and was a great success. Enrollment rose quickly from forty-four the first year to eighty-seven the next, and 130 in

the third year. Not all students were Mennonites; there also were (Lutheran) Germans and even some Russians. Neufeld served as principal in Davlekanovo for six years, until his departure for America.

"...conductors expressed the need for a monthly newsletter devoted to ... the encouragement of Mennonite choral singing..."

In addition to his teaching, Neufeld also devoted time to choral conducting and leading choral workshops. The first record of this activity is found in a report on the annual workshop and meeting of the Mennonite Brethren Choral Conductors' Association held in Kotliarevka, Memrik on 16-17 May 1908.³⁷ Neufeld lectured on various musical themes, reported on his attendance at the Handel Festival in London in 1906, and rehearsed choral repertoire with the workshop participants. At the same meeting, conductors expressed the need for a monthly newsletter devoted to music instruction and to the encouragement of Mennonite choral singing; Neufeld was asked to prepare such a journal. In January 1909 he announced the publication of the first issue, under the name *Aufwärts*.³⁸

meinde von Nord Amerika, " 62.

29. A list of these articles is found in *Zionsbote Index (1920-1940)*, 144.

30. Obituary, "Br. Aron G. Sawatzky," *Zionsbote*, 4 December 1935, 11.

31. Kaethe Klassen, *My Father Franz C. Thiessen* (Winnipeg, Manitoba, 198_),

39. To my knowledge, he was not related to Wilhelm Peter Neufeld.

32. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, §353, 528, 769, 835; "Articles

by J. C. Penner, 1982-1986," Record Group M118 (Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno); Kornelius G. Neufeld Obituary, *Zionsbote*, 10 July 1946, 12.

33. In February 2006, I examined the archival records of the *Predigerschule* in Basel, including the annual reports [*Jahresberichte*] for the years 1876-1916 [StABS (Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt), PA510, A4]. These annual

reports list the names of all students enrolled at the school in a given year, and Neufeld's name does not appear. The only Russian Mennonite students listed during the period 1895-1897 are Jakob Quiring, Jakobs Töws, Johannes Klassen and Peter Koop. On the records of the Spurgeon College in London, see Helmut Huebert, *Events and People*, (Winnipeg, 1999), 104.

34. Wilhelm G. Ewert, letter in *Zions-*

“All three combined their music ministry with an active preaching ministry.”

During the same period (1910-1913), Neufeld also assumed responsibility for editing and completing volume seven of the Mennonite Brethren Choral Association's choral anthology *Liederperlen*: four- to six-page song sheets were distributed on a monthly basis to member choirs across Russia, and at the end of each three-year period these monthly installments were bound together to form another “volume” of *Liederperlen*.³⁹

Neufeld completed volume seven at the end of 1911. By late 1913, he was more than half-way through the installments for volume eight, and in the midst of a busy schedule of teaching and administrative duties, when the family unexpectedly packed up in the middle of the school year and left Davlekanovo for the United States. Tragically, his wife Maria died en route and was buried in Germany in January 1914.

Neufeld continued on to America with his remaining three children. They landed in New York City and made their way first to Fairmead, California. From there, Neufeld moved to Reedley where he taught for a time in

the Mennonite German School. While in Reedley he was remarried in October 1916, to the school teacher Louise Schapansky. From Reedley the family moved to Long Beach, then to Los Angeles, and finally settled in Rosedale, where Neufeld served for several years as pastor of the local Mennonite Brethren Church.

During his first fifteen years in California, Kornelius Neufeld served as chairman of the Pacific District Conference for the years 1920, 1922, 1927, and 1930. What role he played in choral workshops and in the annual Sunday School Conventions and Song Festivals still needs to be explored by local historians.

In 1929 the Neufeld family moved to the Shafter, California, area. During the years 1929-1930 Neufeld taught in a German school. Later he served as pastor of the Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church and directed the church choir; for many years he also owned and operated a small farm near Shafter. During this time his wife Louise taught in the Richland Elementary School in Shafter.

How long Neufeld served as pastor and conductor in Shafter is not known. The last years of his life he devoted to commercial bookkeeping for several businesses in the area. Eventually he had to give up work due to ill health; Neufeld died on 2 May 1946 in Bakersfield Mercy Hospital. He was buried in the family plot in Shafter.⁴⁰

To Mennonite musicians of the twenty-first century, the life and work of these three early musical leaders can serve as an excellent example: All three combined their music ministry with an active preaching ministry. All of them promoted choral singing, especially among young people, not as an end in itself, but as a valuable and important activity offering young people the opportunity to participate actively in the life and worship of the church.

All three would have agreed with Aron Sawatzky, who wrote in the preface to his *Lieder-Quelle*: “We know that singing binds us together; and where singing is nurtured it has the effect of establishing bonds of friendship and brotherhood [between singers and listeners alike]. We [singers and conductors] are all brothers, using singing as a great tool in our common task of building the Kingdom of God.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Letkemann holds a Ph.D. in Musicology from the University of Toronto. He is an organist who has taught music in a number of universities and seminaries. He has released several CD recordings of music by Bach, Brahms and Buxtehude. As a historian, Letkemann has been working on a research project documenting the thousands of Mennonite victims of Soviet repression between 1917 and 1956. He is writing a biography of Mennonite conductor Ben Horch, and a history of the music of Russian Mennonites.

bote, 16 October 1901, 4. Photo in Jakob H. Brucks and Heinrich P. Hooge, compilers, *Neu Samara am Tock (1890-2003): Eine Mennonitische Ansiedlung in Russland Östlich der Wolga* (Warendorf: Verlag Neu Samara, 2003), 100.
35. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, §242.4, 528. The Lugovsk congregation was founded in 1891.

36. Helmut T. Huebert, *Events and People: Events in Russian Mennonite History and the People that Made Them Happen* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Springfield, 1999), 104.

37. J.P., “Dirigentensitzung in Kotljarewka (Memrik) am 16. und 17. Mai 1908,” *Friedensstimme* 7 June 1908, 357-58.

38. Berg, *From Russia with Music*, 28-33.
39. Letkemann, “The Hymnody and Choral Music of Mennonites in Russia,” 432.

40. Mrs. K. G. Neufeld, “[Obituary of] Kornelius G. Neufeld,” *Zionsbote*, 10 July 1946, 12.