



Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast

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BULLETIN

RECOLLECTIONS FROM RUSSIA

The Society is pleased to print a short report from Dr. Peter Klassen, tour leader for the 1979 Mennonite Heritage Tour, about the experience.

"From July 25 to August 15, 1979, thirty members of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast went on a tour to study their Anabaptist-Mennonite roots, as well as later developments.

The tour began with an examination of Anabaptist origins in Zurich, then on to South Germany, to the scene of the martyrdom of Michael Sattler in Rottenburg. As the tour continued to the North, a Sunday was spent with Mennonite churches in the Neuwied area. On the previous Saturday night a special meeting was held with "Umsiedler" Mennonites who have recently come from the Soviet Union. After a visit to Amsterdam and the "Menno Country" in Friesland, the group continued on to Poland to see some of the places, especially in the Vistula Delta, where many Mennonites once lived. It was also from here that the large trek to South Russia began in 1788. A time of warm fellowship was enjoyed in what used to be the Mennonite Church of Danzig. Today a Protestant Polish group worships there, and the pastor enthusiastically welcomed his visitors.

From Poland the tour left for Kiev, then for Chortitza. Here a well-informed Intourist guide pointed out various centers of significance to Mennonite history - former Mennonite farms, factories, cemeteries, schools. On the following day a bus trip through the Molotschna gave the participants an introduction to what had once been the center of the "Mennonite Commonwealth" in Russia. In Halbstadt (now Molotschnsk) the former high school ("Centralschule") is still used as a school. The hospital in what used to be Muntau still serves its original purpose. The M.B. Church in Ruckenau, once central in the Russian MB.B Church, is today a creamery. Many other prominent structures have been preserved from former days. The Mennonites, however were dispersed in World War II.

Many of the people who used to live in the Molotschna or Chortitza are today residing in Asiatic Russia, and so the group visited Tashkent, Alma Ata and Frunze. Some members of the tour were able to meet relatives in the latter two places. Such meetings were very warm, deeply emotional and obviously cherished by the Russian relatives. In most cases this was the first personal contact since parents or grandparents had left Russia.

In Frunze the group worshipped with local Mennonites and Baptists. The church building, seating some 700 people, was packed. After the service individual members were invited to visit homes and continue the fellowship. Repeatedly, the Russian hosts expressed their joy at the visits, and urged members to return so that contact with believers elsewhere might be continued. An emotional farewell at the airport showed how deeply the visit had been appreciated.

The tour group also visited various other cities, such as Tbilisi, Piatigorsk, Moscow, and Leningrad, but the beauty of these cities, though truly impressive, was overshadowed by the tracing of historical developments of the Mennonites, and by the fellowship with brothers and sisters living in another world."

REGIONAL MEETINGS DRAW LARGE CROWDS

The San Jose Mennonite Brethren Church was the setting for a sell-out crowd of interested persons to gather to learn more about their Mennonite heritage. The September 22 meeting, sponsored by the M.B. Historical Society, featured a traditional German meal of sausage, verinika and many delicious side dishes, as only our excellent Mennonite women can prepare. The program provided a first opportunity to view slides taken on the summer 1979 Mennonite Heritage Tour of Europe and the Mennonite Colonies in Russia. Warren Karber, teacher and cabinet maker in Los Gatos displayed some excellent talent in photography with the visual presentation.

Late reservations for the meeting required some last minute scrambling for enough authentic Mennonite food. Society president, Jane Friesen made a hurried shopping trip to Reedley to buy additional sausage prior to departing for San Jose.

A regional meeting held in the Zion Mennonite Church basement on October 22 drew 103 interested persons to fellowship and reminisce around an excellent beef stroganoff dinner. Egon Hofer, long-time resident of the Dinuba-Zion area provided information about the early beginnings of the Zion Church. Hutterite immigrants from Russia came to the Yankton area of South Dakota in 1876. Some chose to associate with Hutterite colonies, while others chose to live independently. Later, some of these immigrants moved to the Freeman area and began to attend Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Churches. In 1909 John Z. Kleinsasser, a minister, left South Dakota to look for land in California. The next year he brought with him approximately 45 persons to settle on a 3,500 acre tract of land known as the Kennedy-Clark Ranch. John L. Hofer, grandfather to Egon Hofer was one of the Russian immigrants making this trip. Egon's father, David P. was given the responsibility of taking care of cattle during the trip. The California land, bounded by Kamm, Road 384, Road 56, and Road 64 was purchased for \$85 per acre. The Zion Church was built the next year, 1911, and still remains today as part of the church structure.

Rounding out the full and informative program was a brief report, with slides, of the Mennonite Heritage Tour to Europe and Russia by Orland and Jane Friesen.

1980 MENNONITE HERITAGE TOUR POSTPONED

Although reservations were already coming in for a repeat of the highly successful 1979 Heritage Tour, a decision was made in November to skip over 1980 and plan for a summer, 1981 Europe and Russia tour. A significant factor in the postponement decision is concern about adequate tour arrangements during the summer Olympics. The Society has been cautioned that hosting the tour during the same time could lead to a number of uncertainties.

The Society membership should be aware that a tour of Switzerland, Holland, Poland, and Russia is being planned for June, 1981. Interested parties may place no-deposit reservations at this time with the Society. Formal, deposit reservations will be announced on June 1, 1980.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- Jan. 26 Regional meeting, Shafter M.B. Church
- Feb. Regional meeting, Fresno area
- Mar. Regional meeting, Reedley Church
- May 3 Annual Meeting, Fresno Pacific College, Fresno.

PETER KLASSEN TO SPEND SUMMER IN DANZIG

Mennonite Historian, and Mennonite Heritage tour leader, Peter Klassen, will be spending several weeks in and around Danzig, and Warsaw Poland during the coming summer. Klassen will be searching for historical materials in the archives to build on the meager printed materials available about the history of Mennonites living in Poland during the 1800's. Correspondence with officials has given hope that many documents may be located and copied for inclusion in Hiebert Library Archives.

Donations to help support copying and microfilm expenses have been received. The Society encourages further support for this very worthwhile project.

FAMILY HISTORY COLLECTIONS

MENNONITE HERITAGE HOUR SLIDE PRESENTATION

In keeping with the Society's year-long theme of genealogy, family history books are being purchased for inclusion in the archives of Hiebert Library. One of the latest to come off the press is The John Franz People--From Poland to Kansas, by Raymond Wiebe. This book traces the beginnings of the Hollander Anabaptist-Mennonite communities in the Vistula River Valley. These settlements included the Franz or Frantz family name. The Peter Frantz family migrated from Deutsch Wymysle, from Warsaw Province, Poland to the United States during May, 1974. They crossed the Atlantic Ocean on the ship S.S. Westphalia together with other Mennonite families from West Prussia and Poland. John Frantz was the youngest son in this family, being sixteen years old at the time.

The genealogical section of the book includes extensive information on the five hundred plus members of the John Frantz family. Although presently concentrated in Central Kansas, family members are living in at least ten states including Delaware, Oregon and California. The index of personal names contains over 1,200 entries.

Society members living in Kern County will recognize the names of Roger and Danny Franz among other Franz relatives living in California.

YOUR FAMILY HISTORY?

Society members are urged to send in information about family history books in their possession or about which they have knowledge. If a family history is unpublished, send it to the Society for reproduction and inclusion in the archives.

If you are interested in writing your family history, write for information about how to start such a project.

A 15 minute slide presentation of the recent Mennonite Heritage Tour to Europe and Russia, complete with cassette tape, has recently been completed. The audio visual presentation combines the work of four photographers. Contributing the best of their works were: Vester Dick, professional photographer, Warren Karber, Peter Klassen, and Jane Friesen. Peter Klassen, tour leader, wrote the script. Don Isaac, business instructor at Fresno Pacific College worked with the final production of the slides and tape. The group of contributors selected from literally thousands of slides to choose those that best represented the visual and emotional feeling of the trip.

The Society is offering to lend the tape-slide presentation to groups wishing to learn more about the historical movements within the Mennonite tradition. Please write for information.

NEWS BRIEFS

J.B. Toews recently spent a short time in Germany visiting with school mates he had not seen for over 55 years. His last contact with these friends had been in the Mennonite College in the Molotschna colonies in Russia, during the 1920's. Several of these brethren were and continued to be leaders in the Mennonite Brethren Church, even after severe persecution and forced movements to Eastern Siberia. Only in the past several months have they been able to leave, bringing with them many valuable documents relating the history of the M.B. church during this very difficult historical period. J.B. is working now, under the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, to help support the cost of having this history written in book form. Information and/or contributions toward this project may be sent to the Society.

(detach and return by mail)

THE BULLETIN RESPONSE SHEET

I wish to become a member of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast. Enclosed please find my membership fee as follows:

- \$25.00 Family Membership
- \$12.50 Individual Membership
- \$ 7.50 Student Membership
- \$ _____ Special Contribution

I would like to designate that my special contribution indicated above be used for the following purpose: _____

Other comments: _____

Send to: THE MBHS BULLETIN
4949 East Heaton
Fresno, Calif. 93727

Signed _____
Address _____

