



# Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast

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## DAVID G. REMPEL TO BE GUEST SPEAKER AT ANNUAL MEETING

Featured this year at the annual dinner will be a program entitled, "A Conversation with David Rempel". Dr. Rempel will be interviewed by Peter Klassen and Paul Toews of the Historical Society.

Dr. Rempel was born in the Ukraine and graduated from the Central Schule in the Chortitza. He studied in Leningrad in the late 1950's, an opportunity that no longer exists and was rare even at that time. He was given access to archival material about the Mennonites in Russia that few people today have seen.

In the United States, Dr. Rempel has studied at Bluffton College and Ohio State University. He received his Ph.D. from Stanford University. For many years he was Professor of History at the College of San Mateo.

His dissertation was a study of the Mennonite Colonies in New Russia. Dr. Rempel has published numerous articles out of this dissertation and subsequent research in Russian Mennonite history. This dissertation is still referred to by many as the authoritative work on the subject. Part of its significance is that he was permitted access to Russian archival sources that have been denied to other scholars.

Dr. Rempel has always been interested in the Russian perceptions and assessments of the Mennonites as well as Mennonite statements and writings. His insistence that Russian Mennonite history be told as part of the larger Russian story has been an important part of his contribution.

He will be questioned about his experiences as a researcher in the Soviet Union and about his historical conclusions re-

lating to Mennonites in Czarist Russia. At the end of the session there will be time for questions from those attending the meeting.

Dr. Rempel is now living in Menlo Park, California. He is in his late 70's and still active in study and research.

## JOHANN CORNIES

*The following is the first in a series of biographical sketches of leaders in the Mennonite or Mennonite Brethren tradition.*

Fifty years after his death, Johann Klassen said of Johann Cornies that he was the greatest Mennonite leader since Menno Simons. Someone else was heard to say, "If there is such a place as hell then that fellow Cornies is burning there today." Wherever the truth lies, Cornies was no ordinary man.

Cornies was born near Danzig in 1789. Because his father was a sailor and had seen the world, Johann was exposed to adventures beyond the knowledge or imagination of most Mennonite people.

He received only a few years of elementary education, but he had a practical mind, exceptional retention and a vivid imagination.

At 15, Johann's family moved to the Ukraine. Two years later he found himself working in a flour mill; he was bored.

He purchased a team and wagon and bought produce from the villagers to sell in distant cities. Making these long arduous trips was less boring and much more

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profitable than tending a mill. He spent the long hours atop the wagon reading, especially history, geography and grammar.

In three years he had saved enough to buy a Wirtschaft--the goal of every young Mennonite man.

At the age of twenty-two he was a married, wealthy man with a homestead and a stately mansion.

The Russian government was at this time making an effort to improve agriculture and manufacturing in its foreign colonies. Massive tracts of land were rented to progressive farmers who would lead their neighbors to better methods.

Cornies' efforts in this area made an impression on Russian government officials.

But Cornies knew the Mennonite farmer well. He was hostile to change and would not co-operate with progressive farming ideas unless forced to do so. Cornies envisioned an institution imposed on the farmers from the outside with powers to carry out reforms. He drafted a constitution for such an institution and it was approved by the government's Guardians Committee.

At the age of twenty-eight he was appointed head of this Association for life. He now had authority to lead the reluctant colonists toward the prosperity he envisioned for them.

Cornies went about his job like a man with a mission. He began by setting quotas of trees to be planted in the villages. From the outset there was some opposition. He enforced his quotas without exception, even resorting to the use of his cane on reluctant farmers when necessary. One disgruntled farmer planted his trees, but he showed his displeasure at being forced to change against his will by putting them into the ground upside down.

Cornies' efforts became very successful, if not always popular.

He introduced summer fallow and other innovations in grain growing, thereby making them more profitable. He was instrumental in building a port in nearby Berjansk, making many farmers wealthy.

For eighteen years he played the role of an enlightened despot over the colonies. "Uns wird alles aus den Händen genommen," complained a local farmer.

Later he built roads, constructed dams and irrigation systems. Slowly he began to leave the sphere of agriculture and im-

posed his ideas into every area of life. He insisted that yards and houses be neat and painted, sometimes even "suggesting" the colors villagers were to paint their homes and gates. He told the housewife what to plant in her vegetable garden and made suggestions for her flower patch. At times he even inspected her kitchen. He prescribed wedding and funeral forms.

In 1843 his association wrested control of the schools from the church, and he completely revised educational method. He founded libraries and literary societies.

In his own mind he remained a humble Mennonite farmer. He knew most of the adult men in the colony by name. When other wealthy men discontinued the use of low German because it was somehow beneath their new status, he clung to it as his mode of speech in the colonies, though he knew high German and Russian well.

In his religion he was more concerned with practice than dogma. He worked toward social justice and unity.

Many of the reforms he initiated were institutionalized and survived him for many years.

Perhaps his most important legacy was his ability to conceive of discontinuity between the old and the new. He established a break with tradition. He challenged the closed order that the Mennonites had clung to so tenaciously for so many years.

## THIS 'N THAT

The Pacific Bookshop will be open on Saturday, May 18, so that you can come in and purchase the books on Mennonite history that are in stock there. Why not just visit to browse for awhile?

The highly acclaimed film, "When They Shall Ask" is available on VCR from the Archives at the Hiebert Library. The rental fee is \$5.00.

Beginning in our next issue, we are planning a series of articles about families with traditional Mennonite names. We will explore the earliest places these names are mentioned, stories about their experiences, and folk lore that their oral tradition contains but may not be documented. We would gladly accept suggestions and material that you have.

## YOUR INVITATION

### MENNONITE BROTHERS HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL DINNER MEETING

DATE: May 18, 1985

PLACE: Fresno Pacific College Campus  
1717 S. Chestnut  
Fresno, California

#### SCHEDULE

##### OF EVENTS: Afternoon Workshops

3:00-6:00 Alan Peters will conduct a genealogy workshop entitled, "Genealogical Trouble-Shooting". You are invited to bring your records and problems and have Alan help you with them. The session will be held in the Hiebert Library Archives so that the holdings of the Archives can be explored.

5:00-6:00 Peter Klassen will show slides he has taken on his two recent trips to Poland in search of Mennonite historical materials in various archives there. The session will be held in room L201 in the Hiebert Library.

##### Annual Banquet in Alumni Hall

6:30 The traditional meal of veranika and german sausage will be served. Featured guest is Dr. David G. Rempel.

The cost for the meal is \$7.50 per person.

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO TAKE PART IN ALL OR PART OF THE DAY'S ACTIVITIES.

RESERVATION FOR THE DINNER SHOULD BE MADE BY MAY 13. YOU MAY RESPOND WITH THE RESPONSE SHEET ON THE BACK PAGE OF THIS BULLETIN OR YOU MAY CALL THE ARCHIVES AT (209) 251-7194 TO MAKE RESERVATIONS.

REMEMBER--MEMBERSHIPS IN THE SOCIETY ARE ALSO DUE AT THIS TIME.

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#### WHAT'S NEW IN THE ARCHIVES

The archives has recently completed processing the MB Pacific District Conference records. They are now working on the records of Fresno Pacific College. This will likely become the second largest record group, surpassed only by MB Missions/Services records.

Here are some new genealogies:

*The Redekop(p) Book* by Freda Pellman Redekop

*The Bergen History* by Michael Hornbaker

*David Unruh Family History*

*A Family Album: Patkau-Harder* by Esther L. Patkau

*Stammbaum und Chronik der Ewert-Familie...*  
by Heinrich Ewert

*Genealogy of the Voth Family* by Abraham H. Voth

*Schmidt Family Record* by J.A. Schmidt

*Aaron Reimer Genealogy: 1775-1953* by Edna Nacntigail

They have also purchased several nineteenth century editions, mostly from the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society auction.

We now have 20 volumes of the periodical *Westpreusse* (1955-1974), which was written particularly for German-speaking refugees of World War II. It includes articles about Mennonites.