

California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin

No. 38

April 2003

"Where the people tell no lies:"

Religious Images of California in Mennonite Memoirs

by Brian Froese

In pre-World War Two migrations to the San Joaquin Valley, Mennonites came from two general areas: Russia and the North American Plains. People from both places of origin wrote memoirs of their experiences of moving to, and living in, California. One interesting aspect of these memoirs is the common use of biblical imagery to describe California. What we find is that both groups use similar images, but in different ways, as California represented their deepest hopes and ambitions in biblical language.

In John J. Gerbrandt's memoir, *Destination California*, the theme of westering and the biblical symbol of the Promised Land dominate. In 1922 the Gerbrandts left Manitoba for California. When they reached South Dakota he lamented, "we had so much hoped that we would be farther along to the land of eternal summer by this time."¹ Later, in Nebraska, he recalled, "we felt that we had reached a great milestone as we now turned west towards California." A few days later he exclaimed, "our faces were turned west, for ahead of us lay our des-



Mennonite immigrants from Harbin, China, picking fruit in the Reedley area during the 1930s.

tinuation—Reedley, California." The West was not just a direction, but also a destination.² Excitement built the nearer they came to California, "as we headed west to lower elevations with expectations of reaching our 'Promised Land', our spirits rose ... the closer and closer we came to the Promised Land." Finally they crossed the border into Needles, California, and, "oh how we all rejoiced when finally we entered this 'Land of

Milk and Honey' with all the oranges and grapes we had heard about!" They rejoiced in the belief that God had brought them to Reedley, on Thanksgiving Day in 1922. It was an adventure understood in biblical imagery.³

Many who came west to farm the rich soil of the San Joaquin Valley used this set of exodus and Promised Land images. One Mennonite farmer, before migrating to California, described the mood

in Oklahoma in 1909, "Because of the ongoing unmerciful storm and continuing drought, we have gotten the blues and already have strong symptoms of the California fever."⁴ Flush with "California Fever," many headed west and incorporated another component of the exodus story: spying out the land. Regina Becker, of the same family, reflected on her childhood experience when her grandfather and some local men visited California. Her grandfather exclaimed, "Upon seeing the citrus groves, the prosperity and beauty, Grandpa remarked, 'The half has not been told!'" The land was "flowing with milk and honey."⁵

In another case of visiting before moving, Adolf Frantz visited San Francisco, from Kansas, in 1915, for the Panama Pacific Exposition. He took a ship from Oregon to the San Francisco Bay, and noted, "In front of us lay the Golden Gate and beyond it the mysterious, land-locked San Francisco Bay."⁶ He also reflected on the 1906 earthquake and San Francisco's reconstruction as "Phoenix-like," "rejuvenated and beautiful."⁷ A few years later he inherited a large sum of money and purchased a vineyard near Shafter to produce raisins. He explained, "Now, at this time California was still believed by many to be the Promised Land, not for a further 'gold rush' as much as for real estate investment."⁸ North American Mennonites understood their move to California in the biblical images of exodus, Promised Land and abundance.⁹

Half a world away, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, in Harbin, Manchuria, China, a group of several hundred Mennonites, who had fled Russia across the frozen Amur River, waited for visas to enter America. H.P. Isaak's memoir is filled with millennial imagery constructing a utopian California. When his family finally

received permission in 1930, it was to travel to "the glorious Beulah land of America," when, "the day and hour had come where we also would leave for the beloved land where gold and honey flowed." On April 4, 1930, they boarded a ship for San Francisco and it was "like a dream...the fact that we were actually on our way to the 'Promised Land,' the United States; where the people tell no lies, no one steals, and none are poor!"¹⁰ While his utopian convictions would be tested by near deportation from Angel Island and, later, by being swindled out of wages picking fruit, along the eastward journey to California he enthused:

"We also believed that the American dollar was worth more than a gold dollar, that the President of the United States [Herbert Hoover] must be like unto the angels, that on some streets the surface was covered with gold, and that all one had to do was to bend down and pick it up."¹¹

Other Harbin migrants wrote less eloquently and less passionately than Isaak, but the cosmic rhetoric was present.

The Jacob Neufeld family "prayed fervently that God would help them find a way to get to America." Jacob recalled that his brother had a daughter, Elisabeth, in California, in either Shafter or Reedley, so he wrote letters to both Mennonite Brethren churches hoping to find her. In the winter of 1929, their family's name was finally put on a list, in effect granting passage to America. They received money from Elisabeth Neufeld, in Shafter, for their travels at just the right time. This only confirmed for them the providential nature of their journey.¹² "Even though they were still unable to get much food, they knew they could endure anything, now that they were leaving for America!" Having endured the trans-Pacific

voyage, they arrived at the Golden Gate and described it as, "the beautiful bay ... the most beautiful sight they had ever seen. This was America!"¹³ In their new home they immediately gave thanks to God, "Now they were finally safe and free from oppression, thanks to the wonderful people in Shafter and the generosity of the government of the United States and the president." Three months after their arrival in early 1931, Helena Neufeld gave birth to a son whom she named Herbert.

Elizabeth Schroeter wrote her story as a fictional novel. Her family immigrated to America across the Atlantic and landed in Galveston, Texas. When they boarded the train for California she wrote of her ability to create a new identity freed from the burden of the past:

"The train to Reedley bore Liesbeth onward to a new hope, a new adventure and new challenges. Behind her a tradition—steeped, secure childhood, a wholesome and interesting adolescence, hard work, poverty and ever-present ambitious hopes glided under a temporary cover of insignificance and obscurity to be exposed only as need for them arose."¹⁴

The importance of these observations in the immigrant tale of new hope in a new land and the voyage to California rests in submitting her older identity to the new in California. Nevertheless, she maintained control of her own agency in stating that traits of her old identity—now submerged—can be recalled at will as needed to cope and flourish in her new home.

Memoirs that used the dominant image of escape and deliverance also include John Thielmann's, *Escape to Freedom*. Thielmann, while in Harbin, credited providence, "He who knows the end from the beginning, into His hands I was committed."¹⁵ In



Tilton's Trolley Trip was a popular tourist attraction in Los Angeles during the early twentieth century, and a likely source of many glorious California images. This group of Mennonites rode the trolley during a 1909 excursion led by land agent Henry J. Martens. Many of them later bought land from Martens in Kern County.

California the first church service he attended was the Mennonite Brethren Church in Reedley where the pastor read Psalm 137, a psalm about captivity, deliverance and vengeance. The dominant motifs for writers from both general groups were those of Exodus and Promised Land. Within the general trope of the exodus narrative, the writers from the Plains stressed the natural abundance of a promised land, whereas, the Russian migrant writers stressed the providential hope of deliverance from evil into a land of promise where life can be made new.

Millennial language is found in the titles of the Russian memoirs, in contrast to the more individualistic titles of the Plains writers, a trend also present in cover art. The cover art used for the Russian migrant memoirs include Herb Neufeld's where a red outline of a man running against a black background gives a bold impression

to the subtitle of the book, *Escape from Communist Russia*. Titles like, *Escape to Freedom*, with the Golden Gate Bridge superimposed onto an American flag on the cover, or, *From Despair to Deliverance*, with a cover depicting a dark green-gray dense forest giving way to a light blue-white mountain vista, or, *Escape: Siberia to California—the 65 Year Providential Journey of Our Family*, all come with symbols of spiritualized place identity as personal stories contained within a divine narrative.¹⁶

Both migrant groups incorporated biblical imagery in describing California. However, the Harbin migrants employ an exodus Promised Land narrative laced strongly with millennial hope and destiny. The Plains migrants used an exodus Promised Land narrative filled with images of natural abundance. After settling in their new homeland, however, such biblical imagery for both

groups gave way to daily detail. Biblical imagery was reserved for moving to California—not life in California. In the Russian memoirs the sense of reconstituting a religious identity in a chaotic context is mediated through the hopeful and triumphant language of millennialism. That is, a view of history that sees in complexity divine providence leading to a time of peace after great travail, which ended once they begin life in California. The North American stories spoke of abundance in terms of the Promised Land, where life became ordinary once the fabled soil became a place less of unmediated prosperity and more a place of hard work.

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Footnotes

1 John J. Gerbrandt, *Destination California*, photocopy of a typewritten manuscript. n.d., 8-9.

2 *Ibid.*, 11, 12.

3 *Ibid.*, 13-15.

4 Leland Harder and Kevin Enns-Rempel, *The Henry J. Martens Land Scheme, Anabaptist/Mennonite Faith and Economics*, ed. Calvin Redekop, Victor A. Krahn, and Samuel J. Steiner (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 202.

5 Regina Becker, *A Bundle of Living* (Shafter, CA, 1986), 16-17. This family fell victim to what is known as the Henry J. Martens land scheme. It is an important and interesting story in California Men-

nonite history and is described in detail in, Leland Harder and Kevin Enns-Rempel, *The Henry J. Martens Land Scheme*, 199-222.

6 Adolf Ingrid Frantz, *Water from the Well: The Recollections of a Former Plowboy* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Company, 1978), 59.

7 *Ibid.*, 60.

8 *Ibid.*, 110-111.

9 There were two memoirs of Mennonites who moved to California from the North American plains where no sacred imagery was used. For one it was to work as a teacher in a Mennonite community and for the other it was the presence of "good land." Frances Berg Parsons, *Exiles of the Steppes* (Modesto, CA: n.p. 1982), 13; and, John B. Jantzen, Frank F. Jantzen:

Memoirs: As Recalled by His Children, 9.

10 H.P. Isaak, *Our Life Story and Escape* (Fresno: Central Valley Printing Co., Inc., 1976), 120, 122, 124.

11 *Ibid.*, 128.

12 Herb H. Neufeld, *Jacob's Journey: Escape from Communist Russia* (New York: Vantage Press, 2000), 88-92.

13 *Ibid.*, 100, 108.

14 Elizabeth Schroeter, *From Here to the Pinnacles, Memories of Mennonite Life in the Ukraine and America* (New York: Exposition Press, 1956), 278.

15 John H. Thielmann, *Escape to Freedom* (Sunnyvale, CA: Patson's Press, 1995), 82.16 Thielmann, *Escape to Freedom*; Sylvester, *From Despair to Deliverance*; and, Block, *Escape*.