

Book Review

John B. Toews, *Perilous Journey: The Mennonite Brethren in Russia, 1860-1910*. Winnipeg & Hillsboro: Kindred Press, 1988, 94 + viii pages.

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John B. Toews, a professor of history formerly at the University of Calgary and now at Regent College in Vancouver, is a perceptive student of Mennonite history and author of several books on Mennonite life in Russia. Toews has given us another book on this subject, published in the series, "Perspectives on Mennonite Life and Thought."

This "slim volume" is an intense account packed with profound insights about the social, economic, and religious life of Russian Mennonites and the first two generations of Mennonite Brethren in particular. It is set in the historical context of a time when elders were deposed through the intrigues of church politics, when foreboding clouds darkened the political horizon of the Russian monarchy, and when observant Mennonite people recognized that the privileges granted them in earlier times were about to be exchanged for a "perilous journey."

The account of the journey begins on New Year's Day, 1838, when Mennonites gathered for worship in the villages of the Chortitza Colony, where they lived in "safety, security, and liberty"; the book ends with a reference to times of dispersion, "upheaval...civil war and migration." Between these two opposites -- beginning and end -- Toews describes how the Mennonites rediscovered that they were "pilgrims and strangers in this world," searching for "a balance between experience and discipleship, feeling and following."

Excerpts from David Epp's diary enrich the first chapter. Epp was a church minister, community leader and keen observer of village life. Epp wrote about preaching and teaching, baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as about "pub fights, wife beatings, unbecoming boisterousness and even accidental death,"-- all associated with "excessive drinking," Toews notes.

Chapters two and three deal with "expanding horizons" and "new beginnings." Both references are to the Molotschna settlement where cultural pursuits were not as narrowly defined and religious aspirations made more explicit than in Chortitza. This meant deep discontentment with the level of spiritual life of church members on the one hand and openness to outside influences on the other. In the decades ahead this "love affair," contends Toews, "would be both corrupting and redeeming." The revival movement brought profound spiritual renewal, but in its midst appeared destructive aberrations.

The next two chapters are an account of the emergence and development of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Before the revival few Mennonites in Russia knew "assurance of forgiveness of sin." The spiritual agony of David Epp's son, Jacob, was no exception. "Poor me," Jacob noted in his diary. "I preach repentance and forgiveness of sin to the people through the atoning death

of Christ and my own heart longs for salvation." The Mennonite Brethren broke new ground. Not only were they "sure of their new life experience," they were also "certain of the direction in which they were travelling."

The last three chapters treat "new horizons and old values," the "crisis" so common to any second-generation movement, and the spiritual challenge of "loving the brother." In these chapters Toews is at his best. The author discusses with rare perception the issues facing a young church and the tensions that arise between innovation and tradition, between the spontaneous dynamics of a movement and the stifling -- yet necessary -- demands of the institution. But tensions are necessary for a movement, as long as they are creative and constructive.

The title of the book is most fitting -- especially for chapters 4-7 -- the subtitle is not. Neither the first three chapters nor the concluding epilogue deal either with the Mennonite Brethren or with the time (1860-1910) indicated. The informed reader also may wonder about such names as "Carl Benzier" and "Wilhelm Schutz". The simplest solution is to change the first to Karl Benzien and "Schutz" to "Schulze". But these are matters of minor importance.

This book is simply outstanding, deserving a place in every Mennonite family, church and school library where English is the spoken language.

Support for Historical Society Grows

The Historical Society Executive was gratified by the positive response to its fund-raising letter last Spring. In addition to many new memberships, the Executive was pleased to welcome fifteen individuals or families as Society Patrons. These patrons have agreed to provide additional financial support to the Society beyond their regular membership dues for a three year period. We thank the following people for their support and patronage of the Historical Society:

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