

as the Mennonite Central Committee.

Both Neufeld and Fast became actively involved in ongoing relief work following their return from Siberia. They helped organize on June 20, 1920 the "Pacific Branch of the Relief Committee for the Suffering Mennonites in Russia." Neufeld became secretary of the organization and Fast treasurer, while B.B. Reimer of Reedley served as chairman.<sup>7</sup> The ongoing activity of this group with similar organizations across the country was instrumental in the founding of MCC in 1920. Wilhelm Neufeld served as an early member of the MCC Executive.

M.B. Fast and Wilhelm P. Neufeld went to Siberia to meet an immediate need. As such it was a notable event. They could not have known, however, that their actions would help bring about a worldwide organization committed to the work of relief and peacemaking "in the name of Christ." The unintended result of that journey gives it even greater significance in retrospect than it had at the time. Neufeld and Fast did not merely clothe the needy in Siberia; they helped launch a worldwide relief organization.

Kevin Enns-Rempel

#### ENDNOTES

1. "In Memoriam," *The Christian Witness* (April 13, 1949), p. 8; *Who's Who Among the Mennonites*, A. Warkentin and Melvin Gingerich, eds. (North Newton: Bethel College, 1943), p. 65.
2. "Todesanzeige," *Der Wahrheitsfreund* (August 1, 1923), p. 11; "Deaths," *The Mennonite* (June 28, 1923), p. 7.
3. M.B. Fast, *Geschichtlicher Bericht wie die Mennoniten Nordamerikas ihren armen Glaubensgenossen in Rußland jetzt und früher geholfen haben* (Reedley: M.B. Fast, 1919), p. 18-22.
4. W.P. Neufeld, "Was ich in Sibirien gefunden und ausgerichtet habe," *Der Wahrheitsfreund* (March 31, 1920), p. 11. [Neufeld's entire travel account was serialized in *Der Wahrheitsfreund* in the March 31 through July 7, 1920 issues. It also appeared in *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* in the March 3 through June 2, 1920 issues.]
5. M.B. Fast, *Geschichtlicher Bericht*, p. 86.
6. John D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee*. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1952), p. 14.
7. *Zionsbote* (June 30, 1920), pp. 9-10.

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## *Families of the Elders: Part II* **Abraham Cornelsen**

School teaching has always been a respected profession among the Mennonites, and a wealth of school teachers has emerged from among the Mennonite Brethren. However, no school teacher has likely had as great an impact upon the history of the Mennonite Brethren Church as did Abraham Cornelsen.

According to the records of the Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church near Hillsboro, Kansas, which he pastored during its early years, Abraham Cornelsen was born on August 11, 1826 to Abraham Cornelsen and Maria Vogt. *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* adds that his birthplace was the village of Grossweide in the Molotschna colony of South Russia.

Beyond the names of his parents, we know little about Abraham Cornelsen's ancestry. The surname *Cornelsen* is a somewhat rare one among the Mennonites, but the family name appears in several early church records among both the Frisian and Flemish segments of the Mennonite churches of Prussia.

The name simply means "son of Cornelius." It appears in a variety of spellings: Cornelsen, Cornels, Cnels, Cnelsen, and Cornelius. Since the sound of the letter "k" in the German language is the same as the sound of the letter "c" when beginning a word, the name also appears as: Kornelsen, Kornies, Kornels, Knels, Knelsen, and Kornelius. The name "Knels" even appeared for some time among the Hutterites of Russia, America, and Canada.

Abraham Cornelsen was a member of the Rudnerweide Mennonite Church in the Molotschna colony, and it was here that he married Aganetha Gaede on February 1, 1849. The

officiating minister was Rev. Benjamin Ratzlaff. Aganetha Gaede was the daughter of Johann Gaede and Katharina Nikkel. It is interesting that Abraham's sister, Agatha, married his wife's brother, Heinrich Gaede, establishing a close relationship between the Cornelsen and Gaede families that persists even to this day.

Abraham and Aganetha (Gaede) Cornelsen distinguished themselves in a remarkable way by having ten surviving children—all sons! Because of the number of Cornelsen boys in this family, you can find scores of Cornelsens among the Mennonite Brethren throughout the United States and Canada. Abraham and Aganetha did have one daughter (and two more sons) but these three children died in infancy.

Abraham Cornelsen received a better than average education in Russia, and became a school teacher in the village of Elisabettal in the Molotschna colony. He was also clearly a person of principle and courage, reflected in his significant contribution to the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860.

It was the school teacher, Abraham Cornelsen, who encouraged a small group of new believers to celebrate the communion service at his home in Elisabettal in November, 1859. Some secret communion services had already been held by those who felt that the larger church population was corrupt and unspiritual. There had been a revival in recent years, brought about by the dynamic preaching and influence of pastor Eduard Wüst, a Lutheran minister who spoke at many Bible and mission conferences in South Russia during the 1850s. Abraham Cornelsen was among those influenced by

Wüst's preaching.

The communion service at the Cornelsen home in November 1859 was different from the earlier ones in that it was not kept secret. The leaders of the colony, both civil and religious, soon became aware of the untraditional—and therefore unacceptable—observance. The elder of the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church called the congregation together to confront the small group of his parishioners who had participated in the communion service. With harsh words and threats, he reprimanded the communicants and encouraged them to walk out of the meeting, which they did with fear and apprehension.

In the days that followed, the small group met to chart their future course. Knowing that their privileges as Russia citizens depended on their Mennonite Church membership, they pondered how they could continue as Mennonites but still be faithful to their consciences. Finally, they decided to separate themselves from the larger Mennonite Church in the colony and establish a new Mennonite congregation, to be known as the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Abraham Cornelsen was given the responsibility to draft a document that would notify the authorities of this decision. On January 6, 1860, several interested persons attended a meeting in the home of Cornelius Wiens in Elisabettal to discuss the document. After much prayer and careful consideration, the document was signed by eighteen men present who were willing to risk their reputations and property by identifying themselves as part of the new movement. Abraham Cornelsen was the first to sign.

In the ensuing years, the Cornelsen family was driven from the Molotschna Colony due to the turmoil that surrounded the birth of the Mennonite Brethren Church. During his exile in the Don settlement, a region settled by German Lutherans, Abraham Cornelsen was first elected minister, and then elder, of a Mennonite Brethren congregation that he established among the Lutherans there. When the Cornelsen family migrated to the United States in 1879, many of these former Lutherans also migrated, bringing many new family names into the Mennonite Brethren churches at Ebenfeld, Kansas; Harvey, North Dakota, and later Lodi, California.

After several years as the Elder of the Ebenfeld MB Church, Abraham Cornelsen died on September 24, 1884. His wife died on August 14, 1909 at Fairview, Oklahoma. During their years together, the Cornelsens had the following children:

1. **Abraham**, born December 26, 1849. He married Sarah Regier on December 17, 1870. They had twelve children. He died on January 6, 1929 in Hooker, Oklahoma.

2. **John**, born February 3, 1852. He married Anna Peters on March 22, 1854. They were the parents of five children. He died on July 23, 1915 in Main Centre, Saskatchewan.

3. **Gerhard**, born March 13, 1853. He married Maria Duerksen, and they had twelve children. He died on July 24, 1931 in Fairview, Oklahoma.

4. **Heinrich**, born October 29, 1854. He married Regina Willms on February 27, 1881. They had twelve children. He died on May 2, 1922 in Fairview, Oklahoma.

5. **Peter**, born March 10, 1856. He married Mary Patzkowski on November 13, 1880. They had ten children. He died on April 1, 1930 in Fairview, Oklahoma.

6. **Cornelius**, born November 2, 1857. He died at birth.

7. **Jacob**, born July 25, 1859. He married Aganetha Nikkel on October 28, 1883. They had six children. He died on June 4, 1942 in Hillsboro, Kansas.

8. **Isaac**, born August 25, 1861. He married Katharine Nickel on April 17, 1890. He married a second time on August 25, 1895 to Aganetha (surname unknown), and a third time to Anna Boese. He had two children in his first marriage, seven children in his second marriage, and two children in his third. He died on January 19, 1944 in Corn, Oklahoma.

9. **Frank**, born September 25, 1863. He died the same day.

10. **Aganetha**, born May 6, 1866. She died May 8, 1866.

11. **Frank**, born September 17, 1867. He married Anna Ewert on June 4, 1890. They had fifteen children. He died on April 19, 1951 in Saskatchewan.

12. **Cornelius**, born February 28, 1869. He married twice, first to Lena Bartel on November 27, 1890 and second to Mary Kusch on July 8, 1906. He had three children in his first marriage and one child in his second. He died in 1954.

13. **David**, born December 9, 1871. He married Aganetha Nikkel on May 1, 1902. They had eight children. He died on January 14, 1955 in Hillsboro, Kansas.

Alan Peters

## Book Review

Peter J. Klassen, *A Homeland for Strangers: An Introduction to Mennonites in Poland and Prussia*. Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1989, 95 + xi pages. \$15.95.

Reviewed by Richard S. Unruh, Professor of Political Science, Fresno Pacific College.

Peter J. Klassen, a professor of history at California State University, Fresno, is a longtime student of European history. The Mennonite story in that history has been a particular interest of his, an interest that has repeatedly taken him to Europe in search of a fuller understanding of that story.

The Anabaptist/Mennonite story now spans more than four-and-a-half centuries. Its beginnings in Switzerland and the Netherlands have been extensively researched, and the heroism and martyrology associated with those beginnings notably profiled. The subsequent Russian Mennonite story, with its epic quality, has similarly received considerable attention. The intervening Polish/Prussian era of Mennonite history, however, has tended to be a "forgotten era."

*A Homeland for Strangers* provides the first systematic look at the story of the Mennonites in Poland and Prussia. It begins by setting the historical context for the coming of Mennonites to these lands. Political struggles and religious persecution in the Low Countries during the first half of the sixteenth century led many Anabaptists to seek a more peaceful existence elsewhere. The lands along the Baltic Sea beckoned them, and soon the migration east began. In return for draining the swamps of the Vistula River Delta, Polish kings promised religious toleration to the Mennonites. With time their