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# The Siberian Journey of M.B. Fast & Wilhelm P. Neufeld

In 1920 Mennonite Central Committee was born out of concern for the suffering of Mennonites in the Ukraine. Famine conditions in that region compelled Mennonites from across North America to form a relief organization that remains today perhaps the most visible Mennonite presence around the world. Yet MCC did not initiate Mennonite relief work in Russia. The work of MCC arose out of the diverse efforts of local Mennonites in many different parts of the United States and Canada.

Among these local groups of Mennonites was a particularly active organization on the West Coast. Mennonites on the West Coast began working to provide relief for the suffering Mennonites of the Soviet Union as early as 1919. The first major project of this kind took place that year as a clothing shipment to Mennonites in Siberia. Two San Joaquin Valley Mennonites—M.B. Fast and Wilhelm P. Neufeld—traveled across the Pacific Ocean to oversee distribution of the clothing in Siberia. Theirs is a dramatic example of the concern exhibited by early West Coast Mennonites for those less fortunate than themselves.

Both Fast and Neufeld were prominent members of the Reedley/Dinuba community, and it seems fitting that they were chosen to represent their fellow Mennonites on a mission of mercy in 1919. Martin B. Fast was born in Tiegerweide, Molotschna on January 6, 1858 to Peter and Aganetha Barkman Fast. He joined the Mennonite Church in Rückenau at age 19. Fast migrated with his parents to the United States in 1877 and settled near Jansen, Nebraska. He joined the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (KMB) Church there in 1880. On February 24, 1884 Fast married Elizabeth Thiessen.

Martin and Elizabeth began married life together on a farm near Jansen, but lost their farm in 1902. No longer able to support his family in agriculture, Fast turned to journalism. From 1903 to 1910 he served as editor of *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, first in Elkhart, Indiana and later in Scottdale, Pennsylvania. In 1910 the family moved to California, but stayed there only a few years. Fast received a call to become the first editor of a new KMB paper, *Der Wahrheitsfreund*, and the family moved to Chicago for that reason. Fast held that position until 1917. Following their time in Chicago, the Fast family returned to Dinuba, California, joining the Zion KMB Church there.

Fast had already made a trip back to Russia before the 1919 journey. In 1908 he traveled there to visit friends and relatives. Following this journey, Fast wrote a book describing his experiences, entitled *Meine Reise nach Rußland und zurück*.

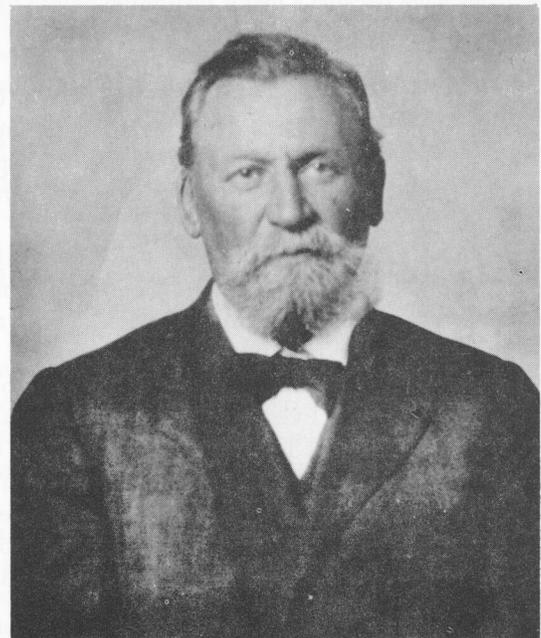
Following the relief trip to Siberia, Fast was chairman of the KMB Board of Foreign Missions from 1929-1933 and for some time was secretary of the Mennonite Aid Plan of the Pacific Coast. Martin B. Fast died in Reedley on March 15,

1949.<sup>1</sup>

Wilhelm P. Neufeld was born in Gnadenfeld, Molotschna in 1854, the son of Peter J. and Laura Lange Neufeld. His father was a well-known photographer and publisher in the Molotschna colony. Neufeld joined the Mennonite Church at age 18. From 1874 to 1879 he studied in a seminary at Barmen, Germany. In 1880 he married Ida Schlenken, who died in 1893. Neufeld remarried in 1895 to Margaretha Rempel. From 1882 to 1911 he was the principal of the Gnadenfeld Zentralschule and the Halbstadt Zentralschule in the Molotschna Colony. Neufeld wrote or compiled several books while in Russia, particularly in the areas of education and music. In 1911 the Neufeld family migrated to the United States, settling in Reedley, California. They became members of the Reedley First Mennonite Church.

Following the First World War Neufeld became actively involved in relief work for suffering Mennonites in Russia. In this context he made a trip to Mexico for the purpose of finding suitable colonization sites for Russian Mennonites. Following his trip with Fast in 1919, Neufeld visited Russia again in 1922-1923. He returned from that journey in an feeble condition and was diagnosed with cancer. Wilhelm Neufeld died on June 7, 1923 in Reedley.<sup>2</sup>

The events that took Wilhelm Neufeld and M.B. Fast to Siberia began in early 1919, when Fast received a letter from Siberia describing the desperate need for clothing in that region. Clothing had become extremely expensive in Siberia because of military disruption of the economy and few could afford to buy even basic necessities. Quakers and Mennonites



Wilhelm P. Neufeld

Photo courtesy the Neufeld family

in eastern states had already sent some clothing, but these shipments had to travel across the Atlantic Ocean and then overland across western Europe to reach their destination. Sometimes, the clothing never reached Siberia. Fast wrote back that west coast Mennonites could better help by sending clothing shipments across the Pacific Ocean to Vladivostok.

Local Mennonites quickly responded to Fast's call for assistance, gathering large quantities of clothing. In preparation for sending the shipment across the Pacific, Fast traveled to Seattle, where he met J.F. Harms, the well-known Mennonite Brethren editor and publisher. Fast and Harms together made final preparations for the shipment of clothing, after which Fast returned to California. Shortly after Fast's return, Harms wrote to him, suggesting that he might consider traveling to Siberia to distribute the clothing. Fast secured funding for the trip and in early summer he left for San Francisco, carrying with him additional relief materials gathered by San Joaquin Valley Mennonites. Several days later Fast embarked on the ship "Shinyo Maru" for Siberia.

Upon arrival in Vladivostok, Fast discovered that the 52 chests from Seattle were already waiting for him there in the customs house. Unfortunately, it took five frustrating weeks for Fast to clear the entire shipment through customs. When it finally did clear customs, the fees came to almost five times the amount Fast had been told it would cost. Other problems beset Fast while in Vladivostok, including the theft of his passport (which later was returned to him).<sup>3</sup>

Unknown to Fast at this time, Mennonites back home had decided that a second person should be sent to help with the clothing distribution. In that role they sent Wilhelm P. Neufeld, who sailed on the "Persia Maru" from San Francisco, arriving in Yokohama on August 10. He made a side trip to the General Conference Mennonite mission field in China, where he visited his daughter Taletha, a missionary there.<sup>4</sup> Fast received a letter while in Vladivostok informing him that Neufeld was sailing to join him.

Once the crates cleared customs, it remained uncertain when they could proceed to their destination. The American Red Cross had agreed to transport them on its train, but indicated that it could not promise a definite departure date because of the military situation in the area. On August 27, roughly two months after Fast's arrival in the Soviet Union, the crates were loaded onto the train. The following day Neufeld finally arrived from Japan. On September 1 the 52 crates left Vladivostok for Omsk.

Fast and Neufeld then faced the problem of how they would get themselves to Omsk. Travel in Siberia was difficult at the time, given the wartime conditions there. Siberia had been in the throes of civil war since late 1918. For some time no trains had traveled between Vladivostok and Omsk at all, because of the destruction of tracks in the conflict. The two men finally departed for Omsk on September 7. Along the way they saw repeated evidence of military destruction. Seven days and eight nights later, they completed their arduous journey of 4260 miles and arrived in Omsk.

In and around Omsk Neufeld and Fast visited with many Mennonite families. They saw evidence of much suffering here and heard many stories of death and destruction during



M.B. Fast with his daughter Agnes and wife Elizabeth, while he edited *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* in Elkhart, Indiana, ca. 1903-1908.

Photo: Center for MB Studies

the war. After several days there, the two men proceeded by boat up the Irtysh River to the Pavlodar Mennonite settlement. At one point a Soviet Army officer ordered the ship to reverse course and sail away from Pavlodar, forcing Fast and Neufeld to disembark and find another means of transportation. They eventually arrived at their destination by train.

Here also the two travelers met impoverished Mennonites, many of them friends and relatives of people then living in California. Typhus had broken out in this area, taking the lives of several Mennonites while Neufeld and Fast were there. Both of them were in danger of contracting the disease, but were spared. In the early days of October Neufeld also visited the nearby Barnaul settlement. In the Pavlodar/Barnaul area Fast and Neufeld finally distributed the contents of the 52 chests of clothing they had brought with them. Some chests had been opened and clothing stolen during the journey, but most completed the journey in good condition. A committee of local Mennonites was appointed to decide which families most needed the clothing.

Their mission accomplished, Fast and Neufeld returned to Vladivostok in early November and embarked by ship for California. The trip home was uneventful and they arrived home on November 25, 1919. Fast estimated that he had traveled 22,624 miles by automobile, ship, train and cart during his entire trip from Reedley to Siberia and back.<sup>5</sup> During that time he estimated that he distributed over \$40,000 worth of goods.<sup>6</sup> Almost immediately upon his return Fast began traveling to churches on the West Coast and in the Midwest, telling fellow Mennonites what he had seen in Siberia and encouraging them to help their needy sisters and brothers. Fast's message was influential in encouraging Mennonites in other areas to begin relief work for those suffering in the Soviet Union, and eventually to join together

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