

Zionsbote: Social Networking in the Good Old Days

by Alan Peters



With the publication of Zionsbote, editor John Harms provided a figurative backyard fence for Russian Mennonite Brethren people scattered by the diaspora of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Mennonites in Russia were familiar with social networking. All they had to do was meet a neighbor and they could get news of the village, the colony, and just about anyone's relative. Because they lived within a well-bounded colony, with villages in close proximity, they had an efficient system of receiving and sending news. In the early days, just about everyone lived

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within a half-day's journey of everyone else, and the frequent traveler could bring important news without much delay. Each community had its “Umbitter”—the official “inviter” who personally delivered invitations to weddings and funerals. The proverbial back fence was often the conduit for more mundane news and views. To this day in the same villages

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in Ukraine, grandmothers still sit along the village street each afternoon, sharing the local news just like our great-grandmothers did in their day!

All this began to change in the 1840s when “daughter colonies” began to be established hundreds

of miles away. In addition, the 1870s brought a new problem to the tight community of Mennonites: the migration of many to both the eastern reaches of Central Asia and the western “paradise” of North America.

Suddenly, news was hard to come by. The back fence no longer bordered siblings or cousins, and oceans and mountain ranges sep-

arated families and friends. News about family and village and church was no longer so personal. The deep, emotional ties of family, clan, and church were painfully threatened by the new distance separating friends and loved ones. Even in North America, former neighbors now lived far apart—in Manitoba, Minnesota, Nebraska and Kansas. The old familiar village faces were now scattered out of sight and out of reach, and old friends often didn't even know how to locate each other.

Fortunately, the emergence of the published periodical came to the rescue. A sizeable number of periodicals came to the forefront; among them were the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, *Die Deutsche Westen*, *Christlicher Bundesbote*, and for Mennonite Brethren, *Der Zionsbote*. Once again, there was a

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back fence where news and greetings and personal stories could be shared—this time across oceans and deserts, national borders and natural barriers.

Zionsbote was established around 1884, only three years after the largest contingent of Mennonite Brethren arrived in America. The periodical began in Elkhart, Indiana, but tended to migrate wherever its first editor, John F. Harms, decided to live. It provided the vehicle for the spreading of village and community news. Births, marriages, and deaths were announced in its pages. The “Todesanzeigen”—or obituaries—were long and detailed, and told the life story of each newly-deceased person, a feature sadly missing in our current, less personal church periodicals. In addition, many individuals sent in their own correspondence, describing their own conversion experiences, their own understanding of scripture, and their personal comments about current events—whether political, personal, or church-related. Many communities had a designated correspondent, who faithfully submitted reports about church and community, keeping old friends in touch over vast distances from North America to South Russia to Siberia. Frequently, a searching writer would ask if anyone knew where an old friend now lived, hoping to rekindle a valued friendship.

The passing of time caused this very personal nature of *Zionsbote* to be forgotten. Later assessments of the periodical gave it a much more “politically correct” purpose. For example, the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* declared that the purpose of *Zionsbote* was “to acquaint the churches with the work in the field of evangelism and church polity in order to stimulate church life.”¹ This subsequent description seems to have provided a new and per-

haps unintended formality and global purpose to the periodical that overlooked or ignored the original intent: to keep in touch with old friends and neighbors, and to provide a new means of social networking.

Dora Dueck wrote her M. A. thesis on the impact of the *Zionsbote*, and her analysis gives a dramatically different picture from the formal description in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*. Her study showed that

“In *Zionsbote* communication, print often seemed in the thrall of oral experience. Contributors wrote as if they were speaking. The newspaper exhibited a carelessness to the visual aspects of print communication, a reliance on earlier social assumptions, a close connection with the Church’s itinerant activity, and frequent recourse to biblical text in the expectation that readers could move from reading to listening via these references.”²

The contributors were speaking to each other, just as they once had spoken across the fence or at the dinner table. They wanted to maintain the familiarity of the old village despite the distances that now separated them. I suspect that they might nod with a certain sense of understanding to the much more modern types of social networking now in vogue. Maybe we’re seeing a return of the village after all!

ENDNOTES

1 *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, “*Zionsbote* (periodical),” by P.H. Berg, accessed August 4, 2013, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/Z590.html>.

2 Dora Dueck, *Print, Text, Community: A Study of Communication in the Zionsbote, a Mennonite Weekly, Between 1884 and 1906* (M.A. Thesis, Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, 2001). An abstract of her thesis is located at <http://grad.usask.ca/gateway/>

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