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Genealogical Resources in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies

People use archives for many reasons. Scholars spend countless hours poring over archival documents in preparation of books and articles. Administrators use them to check the background of issues facing their institutions. Students visit to gather sources for term papers and classroom presentations. Publishers contact archives to find photographs for an upcoming book. Sometimes people call just to get an address or phone number. The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies receives all these kinds of research requests on a regular basis. There is another group, however, that visits the Center almost as much as all these other groups combined – genealogists and family historians.

The Center is not unique in its large number of genealogical researchers. Most archival institutions, including the National Archives, receive a large percentage of their patronage from the genealogical community. Clearly, such research is important to many people. It provides an entertaining hobby for millions of people around the world, yet it is much more than that. Genealogical research links people to their pasts, providing a context in which they can place themselves. It offers connections to persons, societies and places otherwise lost in the mists of time. Research into one's genealogy can shed light on existing family dynamics, personality traits and genetic medical conditions. Clearly, the study of genealogy is far more than simply learning about other people – it is a way for individuals to learn who *they* are.

The Center for Mennonite Brethren has a wide variety of genealogical resources available to researchers. While many genealogists already know about these valuable resources, others may never have visited the Center and therefore do not know how the Center can help them in their research. This introduction to genealogical resources in the Center will provide an introduction to the many

ways in which the Center can assist researchers in discovering their family heritage.

Whose family histories are documented in the Center?

The Center's genealogical resources focus primarily on "Low German" Mennonites. These are Mennonites who can trace their origin to the Vistula River Delta of Prussia and Poland, and whose ancestors subsequently migrated to South Russia before coming to North (or South) America. The Center's collections are particularly strong for families in the Mennonite Brethren tradition, though other Low German Mennonite groups are also well represented. Very little information about the Swiss/South German Mennonite tradition that later migrated to the eastern United States is available here, though a few exceptions will be noted later.

Guidelines for beginners

Perhaps you're interested in researching your family history, but don't have the slightest idea how to do so. The Center can help. You needn't be a seasoned genealogical veteran to receive assistance here. Center staff can provide suggestions about how to begin such a project, and also suggest additional resources that will help you in your search. We have "how to" books that will help to get you started in a general way, and also volumes describing how to do research in specific countries, county records centers, or the National Archives.

Published genealogies: books, periodicals and CDs

One of the first things genealogists should do when searching for ancestors is find out whether someone else has already compiled the information that they are look-

ing for. Sometimes this information appears in the form of a published family history. The Center has nearly three hundred such published works, ranging from simple typewritten manuscripts to elaborate hardcover editions with color photography. Even if you don't find your specific family line in our collection, these published works may provide good examples of how to arrange and present a finished family history.

Some published genealogical resources focus not on individual families but on larger groups of Mennonites. Among the more significant such published resources in the Center's collection are the following:

Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, *Das niederländisch-nieder-deutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* contains extensive information on Mennonite families that migrated from Prussia to South Russia. While it has its own index, genealogist Alan Peters has compiled a much more complete index to Unruh's book. Both are available in the Center.

Delbert Plett's six-volume "Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde Historical Series" is an unmatched resource on the history of that group. Volumes four and five are particularly valuable for genealogists.

The *Bergthal Gemeinde Buch*, edited by John Dyck, provides extensive information on members of the Bergthal and Chortitzer Mennonite groups in Russia, and those who came to Manitoba in the 1870s.

The Center also owns complete sets of two significant Mennonite genealogical periodicals: *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* and *Mennonite Family History*. Both of these periodicals are particularly strong on Swiss/South German genealogy, though *Mennonite Family History* also has extensive information on Low German family histories. Both are fully indexed, so locating specific names is a simple process. Another periodical in the Center's collection is *Clues*, published by the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia. Though it focuses more directly on Lutheran and Catholic "Volga Germans," *Clues* also contains material of interest to Mennonite genealogists.

Recently, genealogical publishers have begun to make information available in computer formats, particularly on compact disks (CD-ROM). The most significant Mennonite project of this kind has been developed by the California Mennonite Historical Society. Known as "GRANDMA" (Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry), the first volume of this genealogical database contains data on over 135,000 persons of Low German Mennonite ancestry. Users can not only find information on individuals, but also can print ancestor, descendant and family group charts for any person in the database. The database is available for use in the Center, or can be purchased on CD-ROM for \$30.00 from the Historical Society. Volume 1 was released in September 1996, and the Society is planning to make a much larger

volume 2 available in 1997 (see more detailed article elsewhere in this issue).

Congregational records

Mennonites are not primarily an ethnic group, but rather a religious one. As such, it is hardly surprising that the records of local Mennonite congregations would contain valuable genealogical information. This information usually takes the form of birth, baptism, marriage and death records. The Center has congregational records of the following kinds:

Prussian Mennonite congregations

These congregational records are, for the most part, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They are handwritten in Dutch or German, and are sometimes quite difficult to read. They are not indexed, though genealogist Alan Peters is working on such a project. The Center holds records for the following congregations:

Alexanderwohl	Danzig
Deutsch Wymyschle	Elbing-Ellerwald
Fürstenwerder	Heinrichsdorf
Heubuden	Königsberg
Ladekopp	Markushof
Montau	Orlofffelder
Petershagen	Rosenort
Thiensdorf	Tiegenhagen
Tragheimerweide	

Russian Mennonite congregations

Congregational records for Mennonite congregations in Russia are very scarce. Many of these records evidently were lost following the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the turmoil of the 1920s. While some may resurface in Russian archives now that those institutions have become more accessible, congregational records for Russia remain for the most part unavailable.

The one significant exception to this is the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church in the Molotschna Colony. This congregation migrated as a group from Russia to Goessel, Kansas, in the 1870s, taking its congregational records (dating back to seventeenth-century Prussia) with them. The records have been published, and copies are available in the Center. Persons who can trace their ancestry back to the Alexanderwohl congregation will often find a treasure trove of information in its records.

North American Mennonite Brethren congregations

The Center's most extensive congregational holdings are for Mennonite Brethren churches in North America.

Mostly on microfilm, the Center has such records for almost every Mennonite Brethren congregation founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States and Canada. Many of these records are indexed, which greatly simplifies the search process. While most are hand-written in German, they are generally easy to use even by researchers with little or no knowledge of that language.

The Center also has microfilm records for a few General Conference Mennonite congregations, including Mountain Lake (Minn.), Beatrice (Nebr.), Alexanderwohl (Goessel, Kans.), Moundridge (Kans.), Hillsboro (Kans.) and Inman (Kans.).

Census records

Most governments find it useful at regular intervals to count and describe the persons living within their boundaries. These government census records can be very useful to Mennonite genealogists when they cover regions occupied by large numbers of Mennonite people. The Center holds several such census records for regions of the Ukraine. Benjamin H. Unruh's book (mentioned above) contains census records for the Chortitza Colony (1795, 1802, 1808 and 1814), and for the Molotschna Colony (1808). An English translation of the 1835 Molotschna Colony census, which only recently was discovered in a Ukrainian archives, is also available.

The Center has no U.S. or Canadian census records, but staff can provide information on how to use these in the National Archives of these countries.

Ship passenger lists

Before 1872 there were no Low German Mennonite settlements in North America. All Low German Mennonite families in North America today immigrated here within the last 125 years. Ship passenger lists, held in the National Archives for the U.S. or Canada, provide details on how and when these migrations took place. The Center has several published passenger list compilations relevant to Mennonite genealogists:

Clarence Hiebert's *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need* includes Mennonite passenger lists for the years 1870-1885, along with many photographs and reproductions of newspaper articles from that time.

A more complete set of passenger lists can be found in David Haury's *Index to Mennonite Immigrants on United States Passenger Lists: 1874-1904*. Like Hiebert's collection, this book is best for those Mennonites who sailed with large groups of fellow church members during the 1870s.

A recently-published resource of value is *Migration From the Russian Empire: Lists of Passengers Arriving at the Port of New York, 1875-1886*. While this collection includes many non-Mennonite immigrants, a complete index

makes it easy to find the person you are looking for. The Hiebert and Haury collections also include complete indexes.

The only Canadian passenger records held by the Center are microfilmed lists for the Port of Quebec, 1872-1880.

None of these compilations are even close to complete records of Mennonite immigrants. Researchers who cannot find their ancestors here will need to consult the appropriate National Archives.

Obituaries

Obituaries can be uniquely valuable genealogical resources. Rather than recording a single event, the obituary often summarizes all significant milestones in a person's life—birth, marriage, migrations, occupations, and death. A well-written obituary sometimes can serve as a "one-stop" source for genealogical data on a deceased ancestor. More than simply a list of pertinent dates, good obituaries also provide a story of that person's life.

Obituaries are a good example of the well-worn phrase, "they don't make 'em like they used to." Today, obituaries in church periodicals rarely run more than a paragraph, and contain only the basic information about the deceased person. In contrast, the obituaries published in Mennonite periodicals during the early part of the twentieth century often were much more detailed sources. It was not uncommon for obituaries in the *Zionsbote* (the North American paper of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1884-1964), for example, to be more than a full column in length, sometimes extending for half a page. These obituaries were truly "stories," including details about the deceased person's childhood, conversion and baptism, migrations, occupation, marriage, church participation, and often detailed descriptions of his or her last days before death. Ironically, obituaries often help bring long-gone ancestors "to life" more than any other available source.

The Center holds a wide variety of published obituaries. Some of these sources have been indexed, making it simple for researchers to find the persons for which they are searching. Indexed sources of obituaries include the following:

Zionsbote (1890-1964). Mostly North American Mennonite Brethren, they contain much greater detail beginning in the 1920s. In German.

Christian Leader (1941-present). United States Mennonite Brethren.

Mennonite Brethren Herald (1992-present). Canadian Mennonite Brethren. Earlier dates are unindexed.

Mennonitische Rundschau (1880-1909, 1920-1929). Includes brief obituaries and death notices for Mennonites from all Russian immigrant groups. In German. Other dates are unindexed. Since 1948 this periodical would include mostly Canadian Mennonite Brethren obituaries.

Der Wahrheitsfreund (1915-1947). Mostly North American Krimmer Mennonite Brethren. In German.

Mennonite Weekly Review (1924-1990). Inter-Mennonite, including many Swiss/South German Mennonites.

Christlicher Bundesbote (1882-1947). North American General Conference Mennonite, including some Swiss/South Germans. In German.

Der Bote (1924-1963). Canadian General Conference Mennonite. Later volumes are unindexed. In German.

There are additional unindexed obituary sources in the Center. In order to use these effectively, the researcher will need to know the approximate date of death, and either the location of death or conference affiliation of the deceased person. These include the following:

Christian Witness (1947-1960). Krimmer Mennonite Brethren.

The Mennonite (1886-present). General Conference Mennonite, including many Swiss/South Germans.

Der Herold (1910-1941). Mostly General Conference Mennonite. In German.

Vorwärts (1908-1940). Published in Hillsboro, Kansas, it included obituaries for various Mennonite groups throughout North America. In German. Continued by the *Hillsboro Star-Journal*.

The Center welcomes all genealogists with an interest in Low German Mennonite family history. Located in Hiebert Library on the campus of Fresno Pacific University and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, its regular hours are 8:00-12:00 and 1:00-5:00, Mondays through Fridays. Some research materials can be made available at the Hiebert Library front desk for use during evening and weekend hours. Please call 209-453-2225 to make such arrangements or for other information. While appointments are not necessary, researchers should call ahead to make sure that someone will be available to provide reference assistance. The Center operates with a limited staff,

and professional reference assistance is not always available. Additional information about the Center is available on its Internet Website (<http://www.fresno.edu/cmbs>) or through e-mail at kennsrem@fresno.edu.

The Lure of Genealogy: Some Personal Stories

Why would anyone want to devote their time to studying family history? For those who have already discovered the fascination of genealogical research, that question needs no answer. For the uninitiated, further explanation may be in order. We asked several local genealogists to explain how they became interested in their own family histories, and why they find interest and value in that pursuit.

Alan Peters (Fresno, California)

It all started over a gift copy of Strong's *Concordance*. My "uncle," Henry Hodel, gave it to me when I was a teenager. We kids always called him "uncle," but we knew that he wasn't like our other uncles. We just called him that because it wasn't proper to call adults by their first names, and he was too close a friend to our parents to always call him "Mr. Hodel." So he was "Uncle Henry" to us.

When he gave me the book, however, my mother and he commented that they *were* related, but they weren't exactly sure how. That interested me, and so I took it upon myself to explore just how the Hodels and we were related. That began a process of sitting down with the grandparents—all of whom were still alive—and writing down what they knew of their families. The stories were wonderful, and thereafter each of them regularly took me aside to relate a newly-remembered event, and a long-forgotten relationship.

Instead of hearing only about the Hodel relationship, I began to hear about the unending connections that linked me to so many others who suddenly became relatives rather than just acquaintances and friends. I heard the stories about the great-great grandfather, Elder Abraham Peters, who led his congregation on the "Great Trek" to Central Asia. I heard about my grandmother's great-uncles and step-great grandfather, who were part of the eighteen who established the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860. I even heard, from my Grandfather Kasper, who knew almost nothing about his family, that he remembered "Fatty" Harms, the pastor of the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church, visiting them when my grandfather was a child, and being told that Mrs. Harms and his mother were first cousins.

All this planted the seeds of interest in me that are still sprouting today, more than forty years later. From the