

# California Mennonite

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Heinrich (H.H.) Zimmermann (c. 1916, left). The Zimmermann-Willems Family (c. 1916, right).



### *In this issue...*

Loretta Willems and Alan Peters explore the role of the weekly religious periodical, *Zionsbote*, in Mennonite Brethren life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Willems opens a window onto the life of her great grandfather, Heinrich Zimmermann. In a letter to *Zionsbote*, Zimmermann provides a lengthy and loving description of the death of his wife. He begins, however, with his childhood in Russia, meeting his wife, and their move to North America. While description of a spouse's death might sound unusual, even jarring, to our twenty-first century ears, his account was an important part of Mennonite Brethren communication at the time. It also played an important role in church members' perception of their faith and of God's leading in their lives. The account can help us to understand much about a particular family and about a church divided geographically.

Peters provides some background information on this church newspaper and how it helped people maintain familial and ecclesial ties despite wide separation. He only half-jokingly compares it to the way people today use social media. The delivery method, its speed, its content, and the level of detail has changed dramatically, but at its essence, it is about keeping in touch with loved ones.

## The H.H. Zimmermann *Zionsbote* Letter

by Loretta Willems

*"In the last years we started thinking about going to America, but there were many hindrances, so that it didn't seem at all possible. [We] asked the Lord and made plans, that if God wanted to make it so, we would understand that it was His will, and He brought everything to pass that it came about and He led us here and through all of the difficulties."*

—H. H. Zimmermann, Winkler, Manitoba

*"Ehfarungen (Experiences)," Zionsbote, May 17, 1905.*

The passage above is from a long, 1500-word letter my Grandmother Willems' father, Heinrich H. Zimmermann (1866-1934), wrote to the *Zionsbote*, a weekly church paper established by the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America in 1884. The *Zionsbote* had wide distribution among the Mennonite Brethren in the United States and Canada as well as among those in the Mennonite colonies in South Russia (now Ukraine). The letter

was written soon after the death of Heinrich's wife, Maria Dyck Zimmermann (1861-1905), a death that came less than two years after the family's emigration to North America from the village of Serjejevka in South Russia. Heinrich wants to let the people back home in Russia know about Maria's death, but it is more than a report. It is a cry of the heart addressed to his beloved community, the *Geschwistern*, the brothers and sisters, of the Mennonite Brethren



*Maria Dyck Zimmermann (1861-1905). At age 29, Maria Dyck Zimmermann married Heinrich Zimmerman. By age 39, she had given birth to ten children before they moved to Canada. Five of her children died in Russia. Credit: Loretta Willems*

church. It is an attempt to understand Maria's death as something other than God's "no" to their lives and prayerfully made decision to leave their home in Russia and move to North America.

I found this letter on my first foray into the *Index to the Zionsbote*, which is archived at both Fresno Pacific University in Fresno, California, and Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas, as well as the John A. Toews Library at the University of Winnipeg. I can read just enough German to be able to extract genealogical data from printed material, and when I pulled up this letter on the microfilm reader and read the opening words, "Am Kuban, Russland, bin ich geboren" ("I was born in the Kuban, Russia") I knew that I'd found a treasure. However, my German was not good enough to truly enter the world of the text. That awaited a translation by a generous friend who is fluent in German and familiar with the old Gothic print.<sup>1</sup>

Reading the translation of this letter was like stepping through a door into the past. Suddenly this great-grandfather, who died before I was born, came alive, speaking to me. I could see and hear a

***"[Heinrich's letter] is a cry of the heart addressed to his beloved community, the Geschwistern ... of the Mennonite Brethren church."***

tenderhearted man who sounded very much like his daughter, my Grandmother Willems. I not only learned the basic facts of his life journey, I got a glimpse of my great-grandmother Maria as well, her struggle with illness and approaching death, her faith and personality.

Heinrich begins his story with the basic facts of his life, starting with his birth. He was born in the Kuban,<sup>2</sup> and his father died when he was four months old. Heinrich then proceeds to tell the story of his life, a story of a childhood in which he, along with his mother and his sister, Anna, were shunted from place to place within the Kuban. Then, when he was five years old, they moved back to the Molotschna Colony to the home of his grandparents, the Jakob Devers.<sup>3</sup> Four years later the small family had to leave this house when his grandparents sold everything and moved to "...Klippen-

feld by Regehren into the small bedroom. It was pretty crowded."

Three months later, his mother married "Abraham Penner from Serjegevka."<sup>4</sup> That marriage began with two years in which "things went well ... but then the bad time began," he adds. Five years later, "it pleased the dear Lord to fetch my mother home." Heinrich says that he and his sister were now "free" and returned to the Kuban where they had friends. Three years later, Anna married David Panretz, and Heinrich returned to Serjegevka "in order to work in the factory."

The next part of Heinrich's narrative is the story of his conversion. It is here, at the point where she enters Heinrich's life, that Maria's name is first mentioned:

"For several years then I wandered the paths of sin. I also joined the Mennonite church at that time, but I was not dead. The spirit of God always tormented me and



*Heinrich (H.H.) Zimmermann and Elisabeth Boldt Willems Zimmermann with grandchildren, (c. 1916). Credit: Loretta Willems*



wanted to convert me, but I did not have the power to overcome. Then I was thinking of marriage. That seemed very difficult, for I knew how things had gone at home. I knew no other council than to take refuge in the Lord, for He could help me, and He did, too, and gave me a wife, namely Maria Dyck from Rosenbach. She was pious and lived in the fear of God, but was also unschooled and also was afraid of those who had learning and wouldn't come along

***“Heinrich then turns to the hard decision to migrate to America...”***

to meetings. That was a great blow for me. Then the dear Lord took hold of my master Johann Martens to the extent that he could not be silent, had to [abbitten] us, his workers, but I was hard and didn't want to believe him. That was in the morning. By noon I was conquered by the strong man and I had no appetite. My dear wife wouldn't give up until I told her that Martens wanted to be saved and [I asked her] whether we didn't also want to. She said yes right away and so we began to pray, she at home and we in the factory. There were other souls who began to cry out to God and

***“... she preferred us to talk about heavenly things or to sing beautiful songs to her.”***

the Lord and it was a joy for the dear brothers and sisters to help us and to pray for us.”

Heinrich and Maria were baptized by the Brethren in 1892 and “taken into the community of the Lord.” They lived eleven years “in faith” in Serjegevkka and experienced “many blessed times, but also storms.... Difficult hours because of illness and death, for we had to bury five children.” Maria

became “very ill, she especially suffered in her lungs, but the very good doctor Johann Braun was there who gave her medicine and God added his blessing, so that she could live.”

Heinrich then turns to the hard decision to migrate to America—their earnest prayer about whether this move was God's will, their conviction that God was leading and guiding them to their new home, and the question, “yet now I ask God, ‘why so?’” The second

half of the letter is about the reason for that question—Maria's death. It is a vivid description of her struggle with her increasing illness, her concern about her children, and her gradual letting go of life:

“She often said: I have been sick for so long, surely the dear Lord will not leave me here long. But Christmas came and went and her longing was not fulfilled. When Elder Brother David Dyck<sup>5</sup> had been here once, when I wasn't at home, he said that that could last until spring. Then she was completely discouraged, but the Lord helped us, he knows how to

deal with his children. So she lay there until the beginning of February, until then she was still able to get up to go to the bathroom, if I helped her, but then that no longer worked, she was suddenly too weak, she couldn't move her legs anymore; then I carried her as well as I could. That probably wasn't always very nice for her, but she was very content, she was so happy that the dear brothers and sis-



***Erfahrungen***

***“The Zionsbote contained hundreds of personal stories, or “experiences” (Erfahrungen) over our time period (1884-1906). The majority of these were conversion stories....***

***Personal accounts were also written about health issues, deaths, births, hardships of various kinds, or answers to prayer. These stories resonated with readers.”***

***“... the paper survived, year after year, and inspired great affection from its scattered readers.... They addressed it as a ‘good friend’ or a guest on a ‘dear visit.’... Since the word ‘bote’ in the name Zionsbote means “messenger,” they could imagine the little paper as alive, as someone carrying the words they wanted to say to, and hear from, one another.”***

—Dora Dueck, *Print, Text, Community: A Study of Communication in the Zionsbote, a Mennonite Weekly Between 1884-1906* (M.A. Thesis, Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, 2001), pp. 102, 2.

ters had taken such good care of us, that she always consoled me that they would take good care of me, too, when she was gone and it is so, may God reward each one....

"Two weeks before her end, it seemed as if things might get better; she could sit in a rocking chair, we could even rock her, and when we sat there in the evenings and talked about how the Lord had led and guided us and that we would perhaps still be able to stay together and settle somewhere, then she became cheerful, that she also wanted to stay here, but it wasn't long until the illness increased, her breath became shorter and shorter, her pains ever greater and her desire ever stronger to go home, so that she preferred us to talk about heavenly things or to sing beautiful songs to her.

"She had an especially hard time of it the last night. Brother Dyck was here when the illness was so bad that she sweated profusely and her breathing so difficult that she asked us again and again to sing and to pray. Once she asked Brother Dyck to pray over her.... At 4 o'clock Brother Dyck went home and I sat with her, but the trouble did not leave her. At 6 o'clock I woke the children and we tended to her, but I kept wiping the sweat from her. When I was

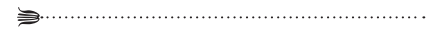
## ***"What can also be seen in this letter is his faith in "the community of God."***

tending her, she asked me to wash her and to make up the bed. When I had washed her, I lay her on a bench in order to make the bed and when I had laid her down she said: 'So, now give me some water.' I did it. When she had drunk, she made a bit of a face and died. She stayed lying there as she was, she didn't even straighten out her legs. It was Thursday, the 6<sup>th</sup> of April."

Like the Psalms of Lament, Heinrich's cry of sorrow and his question "Why?" were made in faith, trusting that the God who works mysteriously is One who can ultimately be trusted. What can also be seen in this letter is his faith in "the community of God." That trust was not misplaced. Maria's consoling words that the "dear brothers and sisters" would continue to take care of Heinrich after she was gone proved true. One year after Maria's death Heinrich married my grandfather's mother, Elisabeth Boldt Willems, who was part of the Brotherfield congregation near Waldheim, Saskatchewan, a marriage my family says was arranged by the church. Heinrich became one

of the preachers (*Prediger*) in that congregation as well as one of the ordained preachers of the South Reedley (later Dinuba) Mennonite Brethren church after he and Elisabeth moved to California in 1926.

Maria's death was the last in the string of deaths among Heinrich's loved ones. Maria bore ten children during the fourteen years of their marriage, all of whom were born in Russia. Five died in Russia; all five of those who moved to Canada married and had children of their own. Heinrich did not have to bury any more children. His own death did not come until August 29, 1934. Elisabeth Boldt Willems Zimmerman, the wife the church found for him, wrote his *Zionsbote* obituary.



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Loretta Willems holds an M.A. in Philosophical Theology and a Ph.D. in Theology & the Arts from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. The first public draft of her book about her Mennonite Brethren family is posted online at <http://www.twillemsmennostory.blogspot.com>. Loretta lives in Bellingham, Washington.



### **ENDNOTES**

1 Translated by Linda Schelbitzki Pickle for Loretta Willems, 2 January 1997. Linda is the author of *Contented Among Strangers: Rural German-Speaking Women and Their Families in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996). This book includes Linda's translations of journals and letters written by Mennonite women.

2 The Kuban is a region of land that sits at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains just east of the Black Sea. Mennonite Brethren settlers were granted land there in 1862. The Kuban Mennonite settlement was about 300 air miles from the Mennonite villages in the Molotschna Colony.

3 Dever is an alternate spelling of Defehr. A Jakob Defehr is listed among the signers of the December 30, 1863 letter to Russian officials regarding the Kuban settlement. See Alan Peters, "Brotherhood and Family: Implications of Kinship in Mennonite Brethren History," in *P.M. Friesen and His History: Understanding Mennonite Brethren Beginnings*, Abraham Friesen, ed. (Fresno, California: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1979) 35-60. Jakob Defehr and his wife Aganetha are included on the "1864 List of Families Intending to Settle in the Kuban Colony" found in the records of the *Guardianship Committee for Foreign Settlers in South Russia*. Their names are not included, however, in the 1869 Kuban Census.

4 Serjejevka (spelled Sergejevka in the *Mennonite Historical Atlas*) is located on the Dnieper River in the Fuerstenland Colony, approximately a hundred miles from Molotschna Colony.

5 David Dyck was an ordained Alteter (elder). He had an extensive itinerant ministry, travelling to all the Mennonite Brethren congregations in Canada, served for many years as moderator of the Northern District (Canadian) Conference and served on the Board of Foreign Missions. See J. A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1975), pp. 155, 158.