

**JOHANN CLAASSEN:  
TRAILBLAZER FOR THE BRETHREN**

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**Introduction**

The role of leadership is crucial in the life of any organization. This was particularly true in the formation and early development for the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Johann Claassen was the acknowledged trailblazer of the brethren in the 1860's. However, the term "trailblazer" was not coined by Mennonite Brethren. It was first assigned to Claassen by the wider circle of the Russian Mennonite Brotherhood.

Johann Fast of Neuhalbstadt, known to his contemporaries as "Secretary Fast" because of his role at the Halbstadt administrative office, repeatedly referred to Claassen as "a trailblazer for justice and freedom."<sup>1</sup> Claassen was the first Mennonite to petition the authorities in Petersburg for protection against the social injustices of the oppressed by the Russian Mennonite Establishment. His negotiations finally opened doors for the landless Mennonites in Southern Russia to obtain property outside the original colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna, and migrate to the Kuban.

But Fast was not alone in such an appraisal. When administrator David Friesen ordered the individual villages to strike the Brethren from their civil registers, thus thwarting Claassen's resettlement efforts, the demand was not carried out. P.M. Friesen records the decisive factor that "Claassen had earned certain sympathies as a trailblazer through his success in the land question in Petersburg and the Caucasus."<sup>2</sup>

The significance of theology as biography is increasingly recognized in the contemporary church. This attempt to assess the role of a trailblazer is biographical in nature. The following five "portraits" focus on his contribution in agribusiness, education, as a churchman, as a politician and as a brother.

## I. A Mennonite Agri-Businessman

Having apprenticed with Johann Cornies on the Juschanlee experimental farm, young Claassen gained some valuable experience in wholesaling products from the Molotschna colony to cities like Melitopol and Berdjansk. He therefore quite naturally established a business partnership with Cornelius Reimer, whose sister Katharina later became his wife. It appears that while Cornelius and a hired hand took care of the daily business routine in Liebenau, Johann became a wholesaler of grain to various port cities on the Black Sea.

His business acumen became evident when he established a brick factory and lumber mill in order to finance the building of the *Bruderschule*. When the young Mennonite Brethren Church experienced oppression in 1860, he decided to go to Petersburg for help. In answer to his question whether the necessary finances were available for travel, he received an affirmative reply.<sup>3</sup> This would indicate that their business was developing a healthy profit. How much of his own money Claassen donated for the cause of the Brethren during his twenty-month stay in the capital would be difficult to ascertain. That he was liberal in his giving would be quite in character. When he submitted a request for reimbursement of some sixty silver rubles for business expenses, and some of the brethren balked at the amount, he retorted: "He who loves his silver rubles more than his freedom does not fit into our proceedings."<sup>4</sup> At any rate, it is clear that he dipped heavily into his own pocket, not only for room and board, but also for such expenses as secretarial fees for his various petitions.<sup>5</sup> How much the several treks to Petersburg, and later to the Caucasus cost him in lost business, one can only guess. However, it must be noted that when the urgent request to return from Kuban to the Molotschna came in the spring of 1865, the once wealthy businessman had no money to travel.<sup>6</sup> A letter stating that he read *Job* and was strengthened on New Year's Day in 1862<sup>7</sup> implies that he identified with that rich man who had lost everything.

During the establishment of the Kuban settlement, the differences in agricultural productivity of the Molotschna and the northern Caucasus became apparent. Following

Cornies' model, Claassen developed an experimental farm where he tried alternatives to the staple grains common to the Ukraine bread-basket. In addition, he established a nursery which supplied young trees for the settler. Already in the spring of 1865, the Russian Major Sabuzky awarded Claassen and Reimer twenty-seven acres of additional land each for further experimental work. Soon new crops such as grapes, flax and mustard were successfully introduced. Cattle and sheep industries improved through new methods of breeding and settlers were encouraged to develop the poultry industry. Apparently the official awards he received in the early seventies accrued to him for distinguished service in agriculture at the Kuban settlement.<sup>8</sup> He challenged his brethren with, "It is self-evident that we must be model farmers in return for all of the imperial privileges!"<sup>9</sup> The fact that he later owned two full farms at the Kuban would indicate that, like Job, the Lord again blessed him with wealth.

## II. A Promoter of Education

Although Johann Cornies had initiated major reforms in elementary schools,<sup>10</sup> secondary education was in the hands of the privileged few. Sensing an urgent need, Claassen and his brother-in-law Jakob Reimer, along with several others in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church decided to establish a *Bruderschule*, a high school to provide strong Christian training for their own children as well as gifted orphans and children of the poor. Thus, as Friesen puts it, Joahnn Claassen "stood in the forefront of this venture, giving freely of his time, money, inspiration and strength."<sup>11</sup> Because their religious ideals for the school were paramount, Claassen and Reimer withdrew their support when Heinrich Franz, who apparently had little sympathy for their "Pietistic tendencies," was appointed as teacher. Whether Claassen should be complimented for his idealism or censured for narrowmindedness could be debated.<sup>12</sup> However, the concern for religious education surfaced again when Claassen and Reimer founded an *Armenschule* (school for the poor) to serve non-Mennonite German settlers north of the Molotschna. Unfortunately, those efforts had to be abandoned when the problems facing

the new Mennonite Brethren Church in early 1860 demanded their attention. Claassen's interest in education, nevertheless, surfaced again while he was in Petersburg. When Gerhard Wieler was dismissed from his teaching position in Liebenau because he had joined the Brethren, Johann encouraged Katharina to petition for him as a private tutor of their children, based on his ability to offer instruction in the Russian language, which was lacking in the Liebenau village school.<sup>13</sup> Such an approach to progressive education was all too rare, since few people in the closed Mennonite colonies considered the acquiring of the Russian language to be an asset, let alone a necessity. Later, when the Kuban settlement was founded, Johann saw to it that each village built its own schoolhouse. No doubt the twenty-four year tenure of David Johann Claassen<sup>14</sup> at the Wohldemfuerst secondary school can be attributed in large measure to his father's interest and encouragement.

### III. A Lay Churchman

#### a. An Ecumenical Churchman

Although he refused to be a candidate for ordination, Johann Claassen was an ecumenical churchman throughout his adult life. During his early work for Johann Cornies, the secretary-treasurer for the local branch of the Bible Society, Claassen was exposed to ecumenical Christians through the meetings of that group.<sup>15</sup> Cornies chaired the local "literary" or reading society, and managed their 355-volume library. Young Claassen may well have passed some of the long hours travelling for Cornies by reading books from that library. When the library was dissolved after Cornies' death,<sup>16</sup> Claassen no doubt will have acquired some of his favorite volumes from that collection. He later supported Mennonite itinerant evangelists and colporteurs like Jacob Bekker both financially and with a supply of Bibles from the Bible Society.<sup>17</sup>

One wonders whether P.M. Friesen's critique that the Mennonite Brethren in South Russia "load their bookshelves with the works of Lutherans, the Reformed, Baptists, Methodists, Moravian Brethren, etc., among

which a Mennonite work must always be a valuable rarity"<sup>18</sup> would be aimed at Claassen as well. On the other hand, it must be noted that Claassen endorsed the "Founding Document" which quoted Menno Simons' *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*. Johann quoted these passages from Menno on other occasions as well, though at least once, it seems that the quotation was not accurate.<sup>19</sup> Other Mennonite books in circulation in southern Russia were *The Wandering Soul* and *Martyrs Mirror*, as well as the Confession of Faith first published in West Prussia in 1660, which the Mennonite Brethren claimed as their own.<sup>20</sup>

Baptist literature influenced the Mennonite Brethren, and specifically Johann Claassen through several channels. His brother-in-law, Jakob Reimer, became interested in baptism by immersion through reading the biography of Anna Judson, a Baptist.<sup>21</sup> A booklet on immersion which Johann had obtained from the Baptists in Petersburg helped convince Jacob Bekker to use that mode.<sup>22</sup> The fact that Mennonite Brethren fondly referred to Christian Schmidt as their "Spurgeon"<sup>23</sup> indicates that they read many sermons of this contemporary Baptist minister.

The Bible study hours (*Bibelstunden*), as well as the child dedication practiced by the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church, and later by the Mennonite Brethren, can be traced to the Moravian Brethren.<sup>24</sup> The sermons of a Lutheran Pietist, Ludwig Hofacker, awakened the conscience of many a Mennonite of that era. How strong that influence was on early Mennonite Brethren like Claassen and Heinrich Huebert is attested by the nicknames "Lutheran Mennonites" and "Moravians." More specifically, because of the intimate associations with Pastor Eduard Wuest, they were sometimes called "Wuest Brethren."<sup>25</sup> When Johann traveled to Petersburg and Reval in the interests of the *Bruderschule*, he stopped at Tula to foster intimate ecumenical relations with such "brethren" as the Lutheran Pastor Landesén, whom he had probably met at Wuest's mission festivals.<sup>26</sup> Visiting settlements as far removed as Odessa together with Jakob Reimer and Wilhelm Bartel will certainly have involved many believers of non-Mennonite church backgrounds.<sup>27</sup>

Membership in the young Mennonite Brethren Church

did not necessitate cutting ties with other "brethren." In one of the footnotes Friesen indicates that Claassen fellowshiped with other Mennonite believers in Petersburg, for which he was duly reprimanded by his more narrow-minded brethren.<sup>28</sup> During part of his stay there he found lodging as well as fellowship with a Baptist tailor, Plonus. The visit also occasioned a stimulating debate about immersion. Pastor Nielsen of the Moravian Brethren is listed as one of his valuable advisors. Claassen roomed with Otto Forchhammer who was of Danish extraction and worked for the interdenominational Bible Society. On several occasions they observed communion together. On New Year's Day, 1862, he fellowshiped around the Word with Privy Councillor Brun and another gentleman," probably also of high government rank. The Van Ark family from the Dutch church provided the "most congenial company," and Claassen refers to Madam Nordbeck and others from various denominations as "brothers and sisters."<sup>29</sup>

When P.M. Friesen assesses whether the ideal of brotherhood was realized in the early Mennonite Brethren Church, he censures the brethren for being "thick of head and narrow of heart." But he held that Claassen had a genuine consciousness of brotherhood. "In Petersburg he practiced such fellowship with the Mennonites there as well as with the Baptists in Tiflis. At the Ovetschka, in spite of everything that had happened in the 'Brotherhood School' and the 'secession quarrels' between him and Nikolai Schmidt, he had intimate fellowship with the latter . . ." (now a leader of the Templers).<sup>30</sup> In the Kuban settlement, which had originally been planned for Mennonite Brethren, Johann welcomed and cooperated with people from the Temple Church, also known as the "Friends of Jerusalem," as well as Mennonites from the "Kirchliche" group.

#### b. A Leader of the Brethren

Claassen's most important contribution as a churchman was undoubtedly made in the organization of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Though he had not initiated the informal communion at Elisabeththal which eventually precipitated the secession of the brethren, Heinrich Franz regarded him

as the ringleader and challenged him to take his followers along out of the church.<sup>31</sup> It therefore seems natural that Johann was appointed one of the three legal representatives when the new group was organized. Thus his name appears in all the early lists of signatures on statements the brethren submitted to the authorities. After having made the fateful mistake of promising not to make any religious moves without the express consent of the authorities (Feb. 10, 1860), he refused to accept nomination for the ministry and even withdrew from the election.<sup>32</sup> However, he evidently revised the heading on the report that was sent to the administrative office.<sup>33</sup> A comparison of the revised title with Heinrich Huebert's original reveals that Claassen had an excellent grasp of acceptable legal terminology current in Mennonite circles. Even while he was in Petersburg, the Molotschna brethren still regarded him as their leader. When the question of baptizing a former Lutheran came up, someone suggested that Claassen should be consulted before they proceed, although the time lag involved in correspondence made that quite impractical.

Both the in-group and those who opposed the brethren acknowledged Claassen's leadership in the young church. Writing about the plans of the local authorities to suppress the movement, Heinrich Huebert relates that "Claassen, who was the leader of our concern, was to be imprisoned. Then—the colony leadership hoped—the whole matter could be resolved in two weeks."<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein Friesen declares that Claassen was a "decisive factor in the church and the actual leader in the heat of the battle."<sup>35</sup> Immediately after the secession, when Elder Lenzmann wanted to be reconciled with the brethren, he sought out Claassen, though the attempt was aborted by the opposition. Later, in a letter to Editor Mannhardt of the *Mennonitische Blaetter*, he refers to the young church simply as "Claassen and associates."<sup>36</sup> Lutheran Pastor Dobbert from Prischib uses the phrases "Claassen and his following" or "followers," "Claassen and his companions," "Claassen's party," and even "the Claassen movement."<sup>37</sup> It is interesting to note that he gives Claassen credit for authoring the document of organization,<sup>38</sup> though Cornelissen wrote the initial draft. Claassen had specifically instruc-

ted him to write the document, and no doubt suggested its basic content. It was big-hearted diplomacy on his part to have Cornelissen's name appear as author.

The fact that he was a layman did not prevent Claassen from engaging in evangelistic ministries. In Petersburg he and Forchhammer conducted informal Bible studies with German tradesmen. "We told them . . . that we were not pastors but that we had experienced the grace of God in our hearts, and this we hoped for them too." <sup>39</sup> When he undertook to teach the stable boy and cleaning maid to read, using the Gospels, the motive was undoubtedly evangelistic as well as educational. Johann's visits to the services in the Liebenau schoolhouse in January 1863, where he gave an informal evangelistic appeal after the benediction, got him into trouble with the local authorities. In response to the question as to who had authorized him to preach, he appealed to Menno Simons, who held that "a person has the right to teach even though he may not have been called by men." <sup>40</sup>

Claassen's most noteworthy accomplishments in churchmanship were made in the area of counseling and reconciliation. His letter of June 18, 1861, admonishing the exuberant as well as the reasonable <sup>41</sup> demonstrates a masterful diplomacy. When he returned from Petersburg in 1862, he set the example by communicating with persons on both sides of the issue, though Benjamin Bekker and Gerhard Wieler bitterly accused him of "forcing reconciliation with W. Bartel, Heinrich Bartel, Abraham Cornelissen and others." <sup>42</sup> His rebaptism at that time was no doubt a move to appease the immersionists, even though he had experienced believers baptism in the Mennonite Church.

To combat the jealousy and strife that threatened to devastate the brotherhood in the new Kuban settlement late in 1864, Johann Claassen and Deacon Peters undertook an extended counseling tour. Nephew Johann reported that Claassen went "to help in correcting disorder. When he returned in a week, he was completely joyous and encouraged. With a glad heart he reported what the dear Savior had done to the brothers and sisters, how all

disorder had been ended, and how they now had a warm relationship.”<sup>43</sup>

Claassen no doubt faced his most difficult assignment in churchmanship in the summer of 1865 (May 4 — July 20), which climaxed in the “June Reforms” that dealt with one of the most thorny issues—excessive emotionalism. To what extent Johann promoted such excesses is not clear. Friesen records that “Claassen himself never went beyond a happy facial expression and shouting Hallelujah, and always kept a simple, friendly and joyful dignity.”<sup>44</sup> But his appraisal of Claassen’s significance indicates that “he did promote emotional fanaticism for a time in a manner I still cannot understand. . . . That Claassen could go along with Kappes against Wuest (ca 1858) is something that can never be forgiven a historical figure like him.”<sup>45</sup> The reference to shouting for joy appended to the June 1865 minutes begins in a similar vein:

Claassen clung with fanatical determination to these childish practices which had already become orthodox ritual. . . . If Claassen could not rid himself of the notion that one cannot do without jumping and shouting in holy enthusiasm, nor ought to, then that is but his “blind spot” which he got from imitating Wuest’s leapers. . . . Claassen continued to hold fast to the necessity of this sort of expression as one of the most naive amongst them all, “until things became too gross even for him.” (Diary of Jakob Reimer, July 4, 1865)<sup>46</sup>

Abraham Unger implies that the situation would not have become as critical had Claassen already resided at the Kuban. He states, “I believe that the Lord will restore many things through him.” When Claassen visited the Chortitza settlement, he dealt only with the “joyous” brethren, which Unger considered to be wise foresight. Word reached the older settlement that in the Molotschna, Claassen “has overturned everything, and forgiveness has been asked of those who had been excommunicated, while those who are removed from office have been reinstated. Other foolishness, such as drums and dancing . . . has been ended, and the friendly, brotherly attitude toward those of a different opinion restored.”<sup>47</sup>

Friesen's overall assessment of that feat of churchmanship reads as follows:

Finally the serious and moderate party . . . succeeded in restoring order under Claassen's leadership.<sup>48</sup> Had anyone tried to institute a more radical reform in connection with the jumping and shouting, and in terms of firm conference decisions than Claassen himself wished, the whole work of reform in the summer of 1865 would most certainly have come to nothing at all. On the one hand, Claassen was accepted by Abraham Unger, Daniel Fast, and Abraham Cornelssen, and on the other hand also enjoyed the complete confidence of men such as Benjamin Becker and Heinrich Neufeld, and both sides could respect his innate honesty and purity. His sympathetic manner, his warm "love for the brethren," his ability to be flexible and gentle like a fine diplomat, yet always for the supreme purpose of discovering God's will only, and to fulfill it, made him, in the hands of God, into the savior of the M.B. Church. That the consequences of the "June Reforms" were more far-reaching than the wording of the minutes and sharper in their effect than had been intended is typical of such situations. They were sharper than Br. Claassen wished them to be, since he was a man who always dealt with a soft touch in church matters. . . .<sup>49</sup>

#### IV. An Adept Politician

Johann Claassen's finesse as a politician comes to the fore in his negotiations with government authorities. His first effort in that arena seems to have been the acquiring of the permit for the *Bruderschule*. Although he had to make two trips to Petersburg to achieve recognition, he became acquainted with many government officials.

Claassen's major political efforts, however, were made on behalf of the young Mennonite Brethren Church. His first journey to the capital netted only the advice that they elect ministers. The second mission to Petersburg became more complex. Internal strife in a settlement, he was warned, could jeopardize one's privileges. But how could the oppression of the Brethren be relieved without revealing the oppressors? He soon learned to ask for land to alleviate

overcrowding rather than request recognition for a newly formed church.<sup>50</sup> Both his letters and those of Otto Forchhammer reveal the complexity of his maneuvering. An impressive summary of his contacts with dignitaries is found in a letter to Katharina. There he mentions privy councillors, a cabinet minister, doctor, colonel, assistant minister and major generals.<sup>51</sup>

Apparently the Molotschna Brethren had confidence in Claassen's ability and certified him as their deputy in legal negotiations. In turn, Johann communicated with them about prospective land grants, wisely involving them in the decision-making process, even if it prolonged his stay. Personal sacrifice was a prerequisite for politicians, their wives and families even in those days.

Claassen was also an adept politician in relationship with the Molotschna administrative officers. A good example would be the "Peace Proposal"<sup>52</sup> he sent from Petersburg, requesting his visa and certification as deputy. It consists of a strong request laced with emotional appeal, a defense of his actions, an interesting appraisal of the positive results in case their response would be affirmative, as well as an outline of the procedure he would expect.

Johann's petition to the Tsar,<sup>53</sup> with its supporting documents, also constitutes a masterpiece of diplomacy. But success at the capital only opened the door to the next stage: negotiations with the Caucasian authorities. This time he served as deputy for both the Molotschna and Chortitza brethren.<sup>54</sup> Five journeys to Stavropol or Tiflis, all by four-legged horsepower, the final one lasting seven months, would involve more taxing shuttle diplomacy than most modern politicians could endure.

However, Claassen also experienced the negative effects of politics. Wilhelm Bartel compared him to Moses and predicted the ingratitude he would reap.<sup>55</sup> For instance, when the last guarantee of Mennonite privileges was to be worked out with the government in Tiflis, Johann lacked the money to travel. Instead of supporting him financially, the Molotschna brothers and sisters expressed their unhappiness with his "inactivity," while the Chortitza group "would have approved the removal of his authority."<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Johann summarized the

situation as follows: "If matters concerning the authorities arose, you knew very well where to find me; also when land had to be measured. And when help was needed with money, etc., I was also expected to provide a solution."<sup>57</sup> On rare occasions, however, he did receive letters of encouragement. On June 18, 1863, Benjamin Becker wrote:

Dear brother, do remain in good spirits and do not become discouraged . . . as you work for the Lord and the brethren, for your reward in heaven will be great. We can never repay you for the good you are doing on our behalf. . . . Here, dear brother, we want to show compassion to your wife and children and . . . see that they will be well looked after. . . .<sup>58</sup>

### V. A Humble Brother

The judgment of the critic tends to be harsh in the heat of the encounter. It is therefore instructive to notice that Heinrich Franz chided Claassen for being "an honest man" when at the same time he moved to expel the brethren from the Gnadenfeld church.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, what an individual does and says about himself often reveals his true character. After Johann and the other two brethren had signed the fateful statement of February 10, they judged themselves publicly "for their false move" by declining the nomination to office and abstaining in the election process.<sup>60</sup> Few persons would have imposed this severe a penance on themselves in the face of such popular demand.

Extensive travels on behalf of the brotherhood involved lengthy absences from family and friends. On one such occasion Claassen had already been separated from his family for nine long months when a brother complained about the incurred expenditures. Johann confided in Katharina that he feared the entire effort might be in vain, but "that makes me humble, which is precisely what a stubborn fellow like me needs. . . . The main issue for me shall be to save my soul."<sup>61</sup> Humility and trust seem to have prompted the statement that "It is God's grace that during the time I have been away it has pleased Him to give you His Spirit in even greater measure."<sup>62</sup> When the

Kuban church received a smarting admonition from Benjamin Bekker, Claassen sent a humble reply. "We had a day of fasting in our congregation. . . . The brethren should not think that we are forming a separate church here. . . . Nor have we despised the letters; rather we have humbled ourselves."<sup>63</sup> The Claassen home was open for the meetings of the brethren, whether they owned a fine home, as in Liebenau, or a shack that didn't even have doors and windows.<sup>64</sup> Even when he lived in dire poverty at the Kuban, Johann could be content, look ahead and affirm "I like this place." Repeatedly he acknowledged his humanness and absolute dependence on God. "Now I am supposed to give advice, but I have none. I know that the Lord still lives, and in His time He will help according to His good will."<sup>65</sup> On April 19, 1866, he wrote from Tiflis, "I have served you to the best of my knowledge, and have worked for your best as I understood it. I do not mean to imply that I have not made mistakes, for I am human and beset by weakness."<sup>66</sup>

In a letter to Katharina one senses the agony of prolonged separation:

Often I wonder why this lot has fallen to me. Why does the Lord not distribute the load? Why must I be the one who is always far away from his family? I also tell my Lord about this situation, and ask Him to remember that I am dust and ashes. I tell my Lord that I am human, that I have a heart filled with longing. You have given me a wife, and I may not embrace her. You have given me children, and I may not instruct them. My infant child I do not even know. My wife has a husband, but she must bear the burdens alone; the children have a father, but the little ones know him not.<sup>67</sup>

Even the financial outlook seemed dark, he wrote, "Nonetheless we believe that a door will be opened, so that I will be able to do what the church has required of me. Just what is going to happen, I do not know. God has a solution for all problems."<sup>68</sup>

At the time when excessive emotionalism had run rampant both in Chortitza and Molotschna, Claassen was

able to stem the tide. The report from Chortitza states that "Since Claassen was a gifted and respected man, his words made a powerful impression upon these brethren." Though they were slow to accept his advice, they were eventually left "with little choice but to confess that they too were in the wrong."<sup>69</sup>

Despite the hostility that developed between some of the early Brethren and the Mennonite Church, tension lessened after the reforms of 1865. Claassen had maintained cordial relations with persons in the Mennonite Church, and his "success in the land issue in the Kuban had won him much sympathy."<sup>70</sup>

## VI. Assessing the Measure of a Man

Johann Claassen was acknowledged to be a leader and a trailblazer by many of his contemporaries. He was "an enthusiastic admirer and faithful emulator of Cornies in all cultural endeavors. . . . Next to the Christian faith, model farming and good schools were his ideals in life."<sup>71</sup> At one point, the various villagers did not carry out the orders of the administrative office against the Brethren because they respected Claassen's "success in the land question."<sup>72</sup> When Herman Fast went to Petersburg to obtain land for the landless Molotschna Mennonites in the late 1860's, he found his task to be easier because of Claassen's prior efforts in that arena. Repeatedly he referred to Johann as "a trailblazer for justice and freedom."<sup>73</sup>

Johann Claassen's greatest contribution, however, is undoubtedly embodied in the Mennonite Brethren Church. Administrative officers like David Friesen, Mennonite elders like August Lenzmann, as well as Lutheran clergy such as Pastor Dobbert from settlements on the east bank of the Molotschna River, considered Johann Claassen to be the leader of the Brethren.

More important, however, is the fact that his own brethren regarded him as their leader. Before paying him highest compliments, historian P.M. Friesen cites him for several errors of judgment:

The action on February 10 was decisively and profoundly detrimental especially because through it, Cornelssen and Claassen did not get the positions for which they were suited. Others, who were not sufficiently endowed, assumed those positions and had to relinquish them only after they and the church had suffered considerable harm, as we know. And this remains so, despite Claassen's wise and humble, and surely honestly intended explanation before the election: Whether they elected us three, or whether we simply worked as brethren in the church, is immaterial. (Why then did God appoint apostles, pastors, teachers, etc., in the church, if it is all the same?) And since we were among the first to secede, this will keep us from becoming proud. This was a weak justification of a promise given in a moment of faintheartedness. . . .<sup>74</sup>

The fact that he did not stem the tide of emotional fanaticism for some time is unforgiveable, according to Friesen, even if some writers asserted that the "most essential service" rendered by Claassen and Jakob Reimer was subduing that movement.<sup>75</sup>

In spite of these flaws, Friesen's assessment of the trailblazer for the Brethren is still the most accurate:

As surely as David, Hezekiah, Luther and Menno belong among the greatest of the world's men, so surely Claassen belongs among the greatest men in Russian Mennonite society, and for the Mennonite Brethren Church is no less a figure than is Zinzendorf for the Moravian Brethren.

Claassen is a much greater man than you make him out to be. I say that, convinced that I know him best in all his weaknesses, but also in the totality of his intellectual stature, that is, through the gigantic literary legacy (gigantic for a farmer, even though very intelligent), in the way he borders on the childish and the exalted in a biblical kind of open-heartedness, even when that open-heartedness turns out to his disadvantage (for the status of his person). It is my conviction that the greatest men in our society (if one may speak of greatness in our microscopic Mennonite world) are

**Johann Cornies, Johann Claassen and Bernhard Harder. Cornies' achievement embraces Mennonite agriculture and education, Harder's achievement the present Mennonite pulpit, and Claassen's achievement—our Brethren Church, which I, despite all the criticism which I have directed at it from time to time (and which I do not retract), consider to be the salvation of Mennonitism in its purely Christian significance and its final purpose. There were better educated men, more gifted men, men of greater personality, men who at first glance were more impressive than the two latter ones, but there was no one who had this insight in such depth and breadth, who had this commitment to a concept, and what is most important—who left such large footprints for us to follow. <sup>76</sup>**

**The Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary  
Fresno, California**

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 P.M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruederschaft in Russland (1789-1910)* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911) translated as *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Winnipeg 1978), p. 253, note 54, p. 1002. Quotations are taken from the new translation with some revision by the writers, since the footnotes were not yet available at the time of writing.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 407, note 182, p. 1011. For a biographical account of Claassen's contributions see Elizabeth S. Klasen, *Trailblazer for the Brethren* (Scottsdale, Pa., 1978).
- 3 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 342.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 368-369.
- 5 Friesen's original German, p. 312, mentions expenses of 99 Kopeks daily—which is missing on p. 368 of the new translation.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 429.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 371.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 474.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 10 Franz Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (Halbstadt, Taurien, 1909), pp. 273-293 give Cornies' "Comparisons of School X and A," "Rules for Handling Children," as well as curriculum.
- 11 Freisen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 105.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 374.
- 14 Dietrich J. Claassen, *History of the Classen Family* (Bakersfield, 1946), p. 8, states that he was generally known as David Invanovitch.
- 15 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 193.
- 16 H. Goerz, *Die Molotschnaer Ansiedlung* (Steinbach, Man., 1950/1951), p. 37.
- 17 Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1973), p. 38.

- 18 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 38, cf. p. 47.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 400, 408, 369.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 133 cf. *Mennonite Encyclopedia* I:683, cf. A.J. Klassen, "The Mennonite Brethren Confessions of Faith," (unpubl. S.T.M. thesis), Vancouver: Union College, 1965.
- 21 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 286.
- 22 Bekker, *Origin*, p. 71.
- 23 John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno, Calif., 1975), p. 70.
- 24 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 73-74, 101.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 179, 281, 100, 104.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 106. For further details regarding ecumenical relationships see A.J. Klassen, "Ecumenical Relations of the Early Mennonite Brethren," *Journal of Church and Society*, 4:46-56 (Spring, 1968), based on his M.A. thesis, "The Roots and Development of M.B. Theology" (Wheaton College Graduate School).
- 27 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 207.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 265, note 73, p. 1003.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 371.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 456, with some changes.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 343, note 136, p. 1009.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 342, note 134, p. 1008.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 343, note 136, p. 1009.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 382.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 386, 387, 390.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 386.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 370.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 400.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 268-270.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 275 cf. 272, note 79, p. 1004.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 426.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 417, note 194, p. 1012.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 501-502, cf. p. 416. "It must also be admitted that Claassen did not act with sufficient clear-sightedness, clarity and energy in this matter. This seems

almost incomprehensible in view of the clear and balanced vision he demonstrated in other spiritual and civil matters.”

- 46 *Ibid.*, pp 441-442 cf. pp. 268-270; June 18, 1861 he recommended they do without.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 436.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- 49 *Ibid.*, pp. 442-443.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 258, note 58, p. 1003.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 367.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 363-364.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 345-354.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 412.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 248.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 414.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 405.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 242 cf. 342, n. 136, p. 1009.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 369.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 370.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 429.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 425.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 426.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 414.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 415.
- 68 Letter of March 12, 1865, *ibid.*, p. 430.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 326.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 454.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 502, note 300, p. 1018.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 407, note 182, p. 1011.
- 73 *Ibid.*, p. 252, note 54, p. 1002.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 343, note 136, p. 1009.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 501 cf. pp. 456-457.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 502.

