

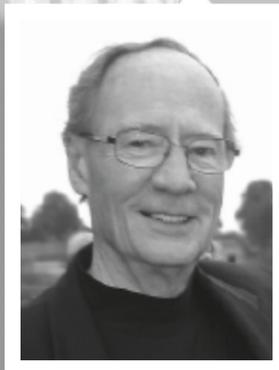
# California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin

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## Peter Klassen: *Mediating the Past to Shape the Future*

by Paul Toews



*This issue of the Bulletin is dedicated to Dr. Peter Klassen, professor emeritus at California State University, Fresno, in acknowledgment of his outstanding scholarship, his devotion to understanding and sharing the history of Mennonites in Poland, and his commitment to Anabaptism and peacemaking.*

On March 5, 1965, thirteen people gathered for the initial meeting of the California Mennonite Historical Society. No doubt the draw to the gathering was in part that the invitation had been issued by Dr. Peter J. Klassen, then Professor of History at Pacific College. That Klassen would be elected as the first chair of the society was a given. For the next forty-four years Klassen would be (and remains) a member of the society's executive committee and one of its driving forces.

Peter Klassen arrived at Pacific College in the summer of 1962 with a recently-completed Ph.D. in Reformation history from the University of Southern California. Before pursuing doctoral studies he had attended Fuller Theological Seminary. Thus he came to Fresno with both the theological and historical training necessary for understanding the specific history of Anabaptists and Mennonites and also the broader influence of the Believers and Free Church traditions in Western history.

In the early 1960s the study of Anabaptist and Mennonite his-

tory at Mennonite Brethren higher educational institutions in the United States (Tabor College, Pacific and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary) was at an ebb. Following the departure of Cornelius Krahn from Tabor in 1945 no one with specialized Reformation or Mennonite historical training had taught Mennonite history at any of the three schools. To be sure Mennonite history was being taught, but by people trained in other disciplines or with avocational interests. At all three schools that would change in the early 1960s with the coming of Klassen to Fresno and Clarence Hiebert to Hillsboro.

Among the thirteen attending the 1965 organizational meeting of the society were the presidents of both Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. Their attendance was surely in part deference to Klassen's stature. However, something more was at work. Both of the Mennonite Brethren schools were undergoing a metamorphosis: Pacific College from its Bible institute and junior college background to a senior college, and the seminary from an unaccredited to an aca-

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demically-recognized school. Both schools were bringing in a new generation of faculty to replace an older generation and to accommodate programmatic expansion. At both schools the search also was on for new ideological and theological directions.

Pacific Bible Institute and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary both began during a period when the Mennonite Brethren were drawn to American fundamentalism. The reasons for that interest have much to do with the history of an immigrant people trying to find themselves in the world of religious pluralism. As acculturation pressures eased and cultural transitions were navigated during the 1940s and 1950s, Mennonite Brethren were once again more able to search for their distinctive voice. In the early and mid-1960s a renaissance in Anabaptist-Mennonite history and theology was clearly underway in Fresno.

Mennonite renewal movements often begin with a rediscovery of their sixteenth-century Anabaptist beginnings. That was at least partially the case for the denomination's beginnings in 1860 and certainly for the 1960s ferment at both institutions. In the Fresno search for the relevance of the Anabaptist past it is hard to overestimate Klassen's significance. By 1964 Klassen was an internationally-recognized scholar because of the publication of *The Economics of Anabaptism, 1525-1560* by Mouton of The Hague, Netherlands. His interests and expertise, however, ran far beyond the sixteenth century. It is fair to speculate that the reason the two presidents attended the society organizational meeting was related to another writing, "The Mennonite Brethren

Church: Founding Principles and Divergent Tendencies." Here was a provocative analysis of the Mennonite Brethren world, its origins, and history during the first one hundred years, and what needed to be fixed. It perhaps addressed a more pressing need.

In Klassen's view the emergence of the Mennonite Brethren in 1860 was to be understood as part of a larger search for renewal and reform within the Russian Mennonite community. It partook of sixteenth-century Anabaptism and more recent European pietism. Its intention was restorationist, the rebuilding of an earlier ethical and experiential faith. It sought recovery, not innovation. The intent was not to break "confessional fellowship" with the parent Mennonite body in south Russia. If it was schismatic it was so in the sense of breaking with

perceived failings, not with fundamental Anabaptist principles. The subsequent story, as Klassen noted, however, "would prove that all too often, grandness of alleged purpose could not ensure triumph over petty diversions and unnecessary impediments. Unfortunately, the idea was not always father of the act."

Some of the shortcomings that Klassen detailed were present from the beginning; others were the accretion of subsequent history. One critical "malady" was "intolerance." In the conflictual environment of the beginning years it was easy to adopt positions quickly without thorough reflection. Separationist groups are frequently driven toward intolerance by circumstances surrounding their emergence and the necessity for drawing clear lines of distinction. The hard position that



*Peter Klassen examines items from the historical library, mid-1960s.*



*“Here was Klassen, the scholar, seeing beyond the limitations of the moment.”*

cohered around baptismal modes and closed communion even resulted in the expulsion of some of the movement’s founders. Postures, once articulated, could be held with an unjustifiable confidence that bordered on “self-righteousness” and “ate into the very vitals of the new movement.”

The reductionism that comes to movements that rigidify too early was evident in other ways. The need to dogmatize on theological issues permitted an easy identification with “a literal and wooden exegetical approach” to Scripture. Extreme forms of dispensationalism, even at variance with a thoughtful confession of faith, were embraced. The social conscience and compassionate spirit of Anabaptism was compromised. Faith and learning were often juxtaposed as somehow inimical to each other. In short, the Mennonite Brethren were in danger of losing the “spirit of Anabaptism.” Change was required to insure that the heritage rediscovered in 1860 not be lost again.

Here was Klassen, the scholar, seeing beyond the limitations of the moment. The present impediments were not intrinsic; parts of the smaller and more restrictive Mennonite Brethren tradition could be set aside in favor of the more spacious elements of the broader Anabaptist tradition. This was mediating the past in a way that might enable a different future. It was an early forecast of the role that Klassen would play elsewhere.

The society that began in 1965 was committed to the recovery of the spacious elements of Anabaptism that had suffered Mennonite Brethren constriction. To that end

it began collecting historical materials—both library and archival papers—that would document the history. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Klassen together with I. G. Neufeld worked energetically to build the foundation for what today is the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies (CMBS).

It is not surprising that Klassen was also present at the birth of the CMBS in 1974. The General Conference of Mennonite Brethren had created a Historical Commission in 1969. Klassen was one of the original members of the Commission and is its longest-serving member. In two separate stints (1969-1990 and 2003-present) he has been with the Commission for twenty-seven of its forty years. It was the Commission that established the denominational archival network with archives in Hillsboro, Winnipeg and Fresno. The Fresno Center while integrated into the work of Pacific College and the seminary, initially, also had its own advisory board. Klassen, of course, was the chair of that board.

Part of the leadership that Klassen provided to the historical society and center was to encourage visiting historical sites important to the Mennonite story. In 1979 he led a tour group that visited Switzerland, Holland, Poland, and Russia. It was Klassen’s first visit to Poland, and how fortunate that the two met. For since 1979 the history of Mennonites in Poland and Prussia has never been far from Klassen’s work and imagination.

The Mennonite story in Poland is centered in the Vistula Delta region. For over three hundred years (from the mid-sixteenth century

into 1945) Mennonites resided in the Gdańsk (Danzig) region and its surrounding hinterlands. They were an integral part of the cultural mosaic. When Klassen visited in 1979 recollections of that long Mennonite sojourn were largely lost to the local population. Mennonites had been cleaned from historical memory by the anti-German legacy of World War II and the constraints of Marxist historiography.

The North American Mennonite memory of their story in Poland and Prussia, while not lost in the same way as among the Polish, does have some parallels. The story that unfolded in the Vistula Delta has long been recognized as the forgotten part of Mennonite history. Like Poland, sandwiched between Germany and Russia, so the Polish and Prussian story became sandwiched between the heroism of the sixteenth-century martyr stories and the tragedy that developed in Soviet Russia. The much larger number of Mennonite immigrants from Russia than from Poland permitted the Russian tragedy to overwhelm our public consciousness, even though the sojourn in Poland is longer by almost two centuries.

Today in both Poland and North America the story is different. In Poland museums in Elbląg (formerly Elbing) and Nowy Dwór (formerly Tiegenhagen), Gdańsk, and in smaller villages display Mennonite artifacts and seek to document the history. The Polish national and local press carries articles about Mennonite contributions to Polish society. Research into the Mennonite story is undertaken by students at many levels and by established schol-

*“The story that unfolded in the Vistula Delta has long been recognized as the forgotten part of Mennonite history.”*

ars at distinguished Polish universities. Academic conferences devoted entirely to Mennonite history occur on a regular basis. Mennonite cemeteries have been cleaned and rehabilitated and special plaques unveiled to mark the Mennonite story.

The resurgence of the Mennonite story is partly the result of the Poles rediscovering their own history. The Poland that Klassen discovered in 1979 was on the verge of rejecting the Soviet control that had been imposed following the conclusion of the Second World War. Among other elements of the struggle for self-government was the need to recover its own past. In the Marxist world ethnic and religious groups counted for little, as history was shaped by social classes. Thus for the long Soviet period it was easy to forget that ethno-religious groups like Mennonites had once made significant contributions to Polish society. Today Poland has much richer sense of its pluralistic past.

Klassen’s work, and that of the Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association, which was established in 1991 through his initiative, has been significant in the Polish recovery of the Mennonite story. The association, under Klassen’s leadership, has assisted many of the scholarly projects undertaken in Poland. The list of conferences and scholars it has encouraged and financially supported is long. With affiliates in Holland, Germany, and North America, association members have also supported Polish efforts to preserve the Mennonite material legacy. For many Poles Klassen has been the face of the Mennonite story; the scholar



Credit: Peter Klassen

*Peter Klassen with former collective farm manager Suchowski on one of the largest former Mennonite farms in the Vistula Delta. Suchowski managed this farm in Orloffelfelde (called “Orlowski” by the Poles) for many years after the end of World War II.*

who returns year after year to collaborate in uncovering and interpreting the many intersections between Mennonite and Polish history.

In the past thirty years Klassen has shared his enthusiasm for the Polish/Prussian Mennonite story with many tourists who have accompanied him to Poland. With his wife Nancy they have traveled the Polish back roads, navigated the dyke crossings and located the places of importance to the story. In academic conferences and churchly gatherings he has shared the story with audiences in Germany, Netherlands, Canada, and the United States. More than any one else he has helped to reconnect North American Mennonites with the Polish story.

This fall we celebrate the publication of Peter’s most recent book on the story of Mennonites in Poland and Prussia [see a review elsewhere in this issue]. But we do more: we recognize that for more

than forty years his books and articles on Reformation, Russian and Polish/Prussian Mennonite history have been widely read.

In a particular way Klassen has mediated a forgotten past to the Mennonite Brethren and to those who share an interest in the story of Mennonites in Poland and Prussia. In the Mennonite Brethren tribe few historians of his generation have been as involved in the denominational historical enterprise. In the renaissance of the Polish story he has no peer in his generation. In all these ways Klassen has helped to make visible that which had become invisible.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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