

# Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society

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Olga Guenther (later Mrs. Frank D. Reimer) with one of her sewing classes, doing needlework. Photo: Courtesy of Doris Penner, Landmark, MB.

## De Neischaal: Sewing Schools of the East Reserve

by Doris Penner

This article is adapted from a presentation made to the Mennonite Heritage Village Women's Auxiliary in June 1996.

The *Neischaal* probably began in Manitoba in the 1920s with the wave of Mennonites who came to Canada from the Soviet Union at the time. The concept came from the *Mädchenschule* - a vocational school for girls to learn homemaking skills. In Manitoba it was instituted as a short two-month course held in the homes of instructors. Courses were taught in Steinbach and Landmark (earlier called Prairie Rose) and likely in other communities as well.

For five days a week, the young women - of about ages 16 to 23 or 24 - learned to make patterns and sew, and in the evenings, they gathered to learn and do handicrafts.

For girls from places like Grunthal, Kleefeld, Rosenort, and Arnaud it meant living away from home at a boarding place near the school.

The idea for girls attending the *Neischaal* was to prepare them for the time when they

would be married and be required to run their own households - and sewing was seen as one of the most useful skills a young woman could learn. Some participants were already engaged to be married and others at least had their eye seriously on a potential husband.

Many of the girls, however, took the course because their parents wanted them to sew for the family at home first, and a few such as Marlene (Martens) Toews of Rosenort wished to become seamstresses and thereby earn their living. For others, it was an alternative to going to high school. Agnes Janzen said her parents couldn't afford high school for her, but they somehow managed to come up with \$40.00 for the sewing course.

The young women started out by learning to make patterns which included taking accurate measurements and drafting the pattern on paper. Of course, there were patterns available commercially, but the selection was limited and with most farm and village families far from shopping centres and not well off, it was the usual thing to make your own. This skill also helped in "making over"

clothes to fit another member of the family when one outgrew a garment.

The women started actual sewing with something easy like an apron and a slip, then quickly progressed to bloomers, bras, and pyjamas, then on to dresses. They were expected to sew not one lady's dress, but three - on cotton or "everyday" dress, one *tjleen zindoachshet* (semi-dressy) and one *grot zindoachshet* (very dressy) - as well as a women's suit, a smocked girl's dress and a pair of boy's trousers.

In the evenings, the students learned and worked at such handicrafts as tatting (lace-making with a shuttle), embroidery, crocheting, velvet cushion tops, cutwork for tablecloths and pillowcases, *nadlemallarie* (a satin stitch with blended colours) and crafts like clay and paper flowers.

The instructors of the *Neischaal* are stories in themselves. One of these was Olga (Guenther) Reimer who is living today in the Prairie Rose Apartments in Landmark. She taught her first class in Steinbach at age 26 - the year her mother died - and carried on for about six or seven years when she moved to British Columbia because of her father's health.

Reimer's desire had been to go to Normal School to become a teacher, but her father saw sewing as being more useful and channelled her into sewing classes which she took in Winkler. It is interesting to note that she quickly became an instructor and thus fulfilled her desire to teach after all.

The young teacher shared the family home with her father and a sister Helen who was 20 years her senior. Helen did the cooking - which included supplying the students in the course with coffee breaks and birthday cakes - while Olga sewed for others in the community, and taught sewing to bring in the supplement their family income.

The Guenther home was on Elm Street (it is still there) where the upstairs had been converted to a classroom.

Tina Kroeker began teaching sewing classes in 1948 in her home near Landmark (where she lives today). She taught for about five years which kept her busy while her husband

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## Sewing Schools (cont. from p.1)

Ed went to work in the bush, she says.

Kroeker recalls a humorous story of the young women in one of her classes who decided to take a break from sewing one winter day. The snowbanks on the yard looked inviting and before long they were sliding gleefully down the slopes. The Kroekers' neighbour had only one comment: *En denk dee - de vell zij naechstitt joa bifreeji!* (And to think - she wants to get married next year!)

The name Helen Krueger brings back waves of memory to many of the women who attended *Neischaul* - she appeared to be an individual one wouldn't easily forget.

Krueger came to Manitoba in the 1920s from Russia and likely began sewing classes in Steinbach sometime in the early 1940s or perhaps late '30s. She died in 1960.

Like Olga Reimer, Krueger lived with an older sister - Margaret - and her brother John in a 1½-story house at the corner of Barkman Avenue and Main Street (the house is now on Maplewood). There was an extra-large room in the rear which could accommodate twelve students - the size of an average sewing class.

The work in this household was also neatly divided. Margaret cooked the meals and did the housework while Helen supplemented the income her brother brought in from a machine shop he owned, with sewing classes as well as sewing wedding gowns for young brides.

As in other classes the women brought in their own sewing machines which they shared with those who didn't own one. Those off the machine cut patterns or sewed buttonholes which was a hated task. Hildegard Adrian recalls they would ask each other (as a joke) whether *Auntji* at H.W. Reimer's store had buttonholes to sell.

The instructors are remembered as running a tight ship. Most of the students benefitted from this strict instruction but there were the odd ones who had to rip open a bodice once too often and quit.

*Doris Penner is a researcher, columnist and reporter for The Carillon in Steinbach, MB. She is also the chairperson of the Cultural Committee of the MHV Board. Her home is in Landmark, MB.*

## Mennonite Heritage House in Reinland, Manitoba

by Henry G. Ens

*This is the concluding section of the article which appeared in the September issue of the MMHS Newsletter.*

The barn has the original "face to face" horse stalls as well as the "face out" stalls for the rest of the horsepower that was so important in the pioneer days. The cattle played a very important role in providing the family with milk, cream, butter, and meat. Their place in the barn was the so-called *Ohwesied*, lean-to, on the west side of the barn.

The buggy, which dates back to the early 1900s is the one that was used going to church and visiting relatives in other villages. An original McCormick Deering two-tiered grain wagon with high wooden wheels, the famous *Doublebax*, had to be there for hauling the grain from the threshing machine to the granary and alter to town.

Most of the stuff that is under the mechanics workbench is still from the Abram Rempel era. The forge has bellows instead of the more modern blower. A number of tongs used for smithing are hanging at the forge. Plough shares are lying besides the forge waiting to be sharpened and the post drill is ready to make steel holes.

## Jewish~Mennonite~Ukrainian Groups Meet Again

*This report is adapted from a slightly longer version which appeared on 21 October 1998 in the Jewish Post & News, written by Bess Kaplan.*

When representatives of Jewish, Mennonite, and Ukrainian communities met at the University of Manitoba for a conference in August, 1995, it was agreed that more interchanges of that sort could be interesting and helpful.

On October 14 this year it happened again, at the Asper Jewish Community Campus in Winnipeg, Manitoba. This time representatives of each group were invited to speak more specifically about their diversities, programs, and perceived changes for the future.

About 150 persons heard the presentations and stayed for extensive discussion and refreshments. The speakers included Rabbi

Grandfather, however, was more of a carpenter than a blacksmith, so he made furniture and some of the essential tools. The woodwork bench is the one he worked at. Some of the tools/instruments that he used/made were discovered during clean-up. There are also a few unfinished items he worked at. The table in the "corner room" is one of the last tables that grandfather made.

Although the house has seen some modernization, it is basically the same as when the grandparents bought it. The *Tiajel-Ohwen*, central brick heater, is still intact, as well as the *Riatja-Kohma*, meat smoking chamber, on the second floor. The *Sommastohw* has been converted into a wash/bath and laundry room. An oil furnace has been installed in the corner of the *Faaht'hüs*, front room.

The *Sommatjääatj*, summer kitchen or *Wintjlehüs* to the west of the building was used in summer for cooking, canning, and baking to keep the house cooler. This usually had a *Spoarhiat*, a stove where fine tree branches or corn cobs were used as fuel.

Persons wishing to visit Heritage House may call Henry at 1-204-325-8811 or e-mail [hgens@web4.net](mailto:hgens@web4.net)

Moshe Stern, professor of religious studies at the U. of M., Dr. Stella Hryniuk of U. of M., as well as Dr. Lawrence Klippenstein, historian/archivist, recently retired from the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg.

Jewish communities wrestle with the question of secularization, according to Dr. Stern, Ukrainians are concerned about assimilation and loss of group identity, while Manitoba Mennonites have needed to come to terms with splintering into a dozen or more smaller groupings which attempt to retain some commonality as one community of believers.

Roz Usiskin, currently president of the Jewish Historical Society summarized some ongoing objectives of three joint gatherings held so far. "During the (past five years), we have built bridges amongst the three communities. ...In this way we will be able to strengthen and make meaningful the multicultural fact in Canada".

## *The Mennonites in Manitoba*: Review of A New Film

by Bert Friesen

On consecutive evenings in southern Manitoba, a new documentary, *The Mennonites in Manitoba*, was screened at the end of September. Then in October it was shown on Prairie Public Television.

I went to the screening in Winnipeg at Jubilee Place. An audience of between 250-300 people were in attendance. The principals of the production and the management of Prairie Public TV were represented.

The theme of the documentary was to celebrate the history and culture of the Mennonite people in Manitoba. It traced the history from the coming of the first Mennonite settlers in 1874 to the present. In doing so it attempted to speak to the sense of identity the Mennonites have and have had in their history in Manitoba.

The first seventy-five years were well portrayed. It was a period of overcoming pioneering obstacles, learning about a new context for being, and continuing to form sub-groups on points of theological differences, perceived or real. This story is becoming increasingly documented and retold from generation to generation. The story after the World War II was not so well told. It is a period of diversification, urbanization, and assimilation. It needs much more work to tell this story and document it. This documentary only succeeded in making a beginning of the telling.

The interview approach to telling the story in this documentary was effective - to a certain degree. The individuals interviewed came from various walks of the Mennonite world but unfortunately they were not very representative. They came primarily from the middle-aged generation. The older generation of our senior citizens and the younger generation of students and young adults beginning their life journey views were largely unrepresented. Therefore the story was very biased from the perspective of one generation, albeit from various walks of life.

In exploring the sense of identity, the documentary tackled the central issue of whether Mennonites were an ethnic or religious group. Again, it would have

made the answer more complete if a broader spectrum of views would have been aired. Since this is such a central issue, I would have liked to have seen a greater exploration of the ethnic question seen in the context of the broader Manitoba society. On the religious side, I would have liked to have seen more discussion of the central tenets of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, what those tenets are and why they are adhered to so strongly. Brief mention was made about immigration and emigration, and the formation of sub-groups, but not enough about the central tenets. They are what make us Mennonites and why anyone can become a Mennonite. It mentioned that Mennonites have become a diverse people but it did not get a perspective from people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

*The Mennonites in Manitoba* will be a useful tool and reminder of who Mennonites are. It will hopefully spur us on to tell more of our story and explore in greater depth who we are as a people and as individuals. Prairie Public has made a memorable documentary. It is well worth viewing.

### Video for Sale

A video copy of the film *The Mennonites in Manitoba* may be purchased for C\$38.99

from: **Mennonite Books**, 844K McLeod Ave., Winnipeg, MB R2G 2T7  
ph. 1-204-668-7475 or e-mail  
mennonitebooks@brandtfamily.com

To contact **Prairie Public**, write to Bob Dambach, 207 North 5<sup>th</sup> St., Box 3240, Fargo, ND 58108-3240  
ph. 1-701-241-6900 or e-mail  
bdambach@prairiepublic.org

## One Hundred Years..and More



Belated happy birthday greetings to Eva Klippenstein (left) and Gertrude Hildebrand (right), both of Altona, Manitoba. Eva, originally from Neuberghthal village, celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday at the Personal Care Home on September 19. Her husband, Peter, passed away in 1954, leaving her and her son Bill to run the farm with the help of a hired hand.

Gertrude, originally from the village of Sommerfeld, a few miles east of Neuberghthal, celebrated her 101<sup>st</sup> birthday at the Ebenezer Home on September 20. She was the thirteenth child in the Abram and Helena Wiebe family of 16 children. Her husband, Jacob, passed away in 1980 and three of her sons died after 1983. She attributes her long life, to "healthy living, a love of the Lord, and lots of laughter". Photos and information courtesy of Red River Valley Echo, Altona, MB.

## Membership and Publicity Committee Report

This committee is responsible for among other things the publication of this Newsletter. It has discussed some plans for this Newsletter for the coming year. It is hoped to produce it quarterly. The editors will remain, namely Lawrence Klippenstein and Bert Friesen. They welcome any submissions for consideration for publication. Also, there has been some discussion about the Society's contract to buy subscriptions to the *Mennonite Historian* for its members. Opinions on any of these or other matters are welcomed. Please contact us as indicated on our masthead.

The current membership is 151 paid up, 10 life, and 7 honorary, for a total of 168.

## West Reserve Local History Workshop Held in Reinfeld, Manitoba

The Local History committee of MMHS has been offering West Reserve history workshops with some regularity in recent years. Another one was held on November 14 in the community centre of the village of Reinfeld not far east of Winkler. Fifty to sixty persons attended the morning and afternoon sessions.

The five presentations of the day included "Hoffnungsfeld: Community and Phenomenon", by John Dyck of Winnipeg; "Mennonite Brethren Beginnings in Manitoba" by Arnie Neufeld of Winkler; "Reorganizing the Old Colony Mennonite Church in 1936" by Rev. Abe Rempel of the Old Colony Church in Manitoba, as well as papers on the villages of Blumstein and Reinfeld by Peter Heide and Bruce Wiebe, both of the Winkler area.

Among other things it might be observed from these studies that Hoffnungsfeld, Blumstein, and Burwalde, which was also connected to Mennonite Brethren beginnings, were all villages which dissolved fairly early. None it seems lasted much longer than 1885. Reinfeld, of course, continues to this day. Mennonite settlement in the former West Reserve area began in 1875.

Participants in the workshop had access to an extensive selection of books being sold by Mennonite Books, under Gil Brandt. Displays included detailed maps of Reinfeld and the entire West Reserve, as well as other documents related to the presentations. It was noted that the next such workshop is being planned for the spring of 1999.

The local history committee consists of ten members, with Dr. Adolf Ens of CMBC chairing the group. *Lawrence Klippenstein*

## Book Notes

- The autumn, 1998, issue of *Prairie Fire*, focused on young adult fiction. It is published by Prairie Fire Press Inc. in Winnipeg. It has contributions by Sarah Klassen, Paul Krahn, Bernice Friesen, Gloria Hildebrand, Deborah Froese, and Sara



The community of Chortitz, a few kilometres southeast of Winkler, will celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mennonites coming to Manitoba, on 9-11 July 1999. For further information on this homecoming event, contact Anne Thiessen, 1068 Hector Bay E., Winnipeg, MB R3M 3S1, or ph. 1-204-452-6836.

Harms. It is dedicated to the memory of the late Dr. Victor Peters. To order the issue call 1-204-943-9066.

- Gerhard Ratzlaff's *Die Ruta Transchaco: Wie Sie Enstand* (How the Transchaco Highway was Built), published in Asuncion, Paraguay (pb., 270 pp., 1998) includes the names of several Manitoba Paxmen and others who assisted in the project in the 1950s and later. Among them were Menno Wiebe, Winnipeg, Tony Braun (deceased), Altona, Jake Funk, Ile des Chenes, and John Janzen, Niverville. The book may be ordered from *Mennonitische Post*, Steinbach, MB, Canada, R0A 2A0, for C\$20.00 plus shipping and GST.

- For readers of Low German, Wolfgang W. and Melita A. Moelleken have written *Aus dem Leben Niederdeutscher Mennoniten* (pb., 325 pp.), published in 1996 by N.G. Elwert Verlag, in Marburg, Germany. Interviewees, whose responses are written in Low German include people like Abraham and Sarah R. from Gnadental, Chihuahua, Mexico, whose parents came from Manitoba, and Dr. Alfred Hecht, who studied at Winnipeg universities for some years and then went to teach in Waterloo, Ontario.

- The June, 1998, issue of *Preservings* published by the Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, focuses on the Chortitzer Mennonites of the former East Reserve in Manitoba. Subscriptions to this journal may be ordered (for \$20.00/yr.) from HSHS, Box 1960, Steinbach, MB, R0A 2A0. Family studies listed below are reviewed in this issue.

- Recently published family studies include *Gateway to the Past: The Cornelius D. and Maria Loewen Story* (Morris, MB, 325 pp., 1997) by Nettie Brandt and Lorilee Scharfenberg; and *The Jacob D.K. Plett Family 1926-1998*, (Steinbach, MB, 72 pp.) by Beverley Lynn Penner.

- Dr. Wilmer Harms' recently published book, *The Odyssey of Escapes from Russia: The Saga of Anna K* (Hillsboro, KS: Hearth Publishing, 1998, pb., 203 pp.) has an interesting Manitoba connection. Anna K. (Neufeld), later of North Newton, Kansas, U.S.A., escaped from the Soviet Union by crossing the Amur River to reach Harbin, China, in the company of several friends. One of them was Maria Reimer, known also as Mia who later met and married the late A.A. DeFehr of Winnipeg. Her life story, which also talks about this escape, was published in 1982 under the title *Mia, The Story of a Remarkable Woman*. The book is available at **Mennonite Books** (1-204-668-7475). *Escapes from Russia* can be ordered from the author at 2904 - B Ivy Dr., North Newton, KS, U.S.A. 67117.

- The second volume of Dr. George K. Epp's *Geschichte der Mennoniten in Russland* is now off the press. Send orders to **Mennonite Books**, 844K McLeod Ave., Winnipeg, MB R2G 2T7, ph.1-204-668-7475, e-mail [mennonitebooks@brandtfamily.com](mailto:mennonitebooks@brandtfamily.com)

- SPECIAL FOR CHRISTMAS! Get two copies for the price of one of a fine folk art work titled *Mennonites in Mexcio / Mennoniten in Mexiko* by Sarah Unger de Peters. The text is in English and German. Cost: C\$10.95, inc. shipping and GST. Order from: *Mennonitische Post*, Box 1120, Steinbach, MB R0A 2A0.

- NEW ITEMS! The first issue of *Rhubarb*, (pb., 40 pp.) the journal of the Mennonite Literary Society, just reorganized, is now available from its editor, Victor Jerrett Enns, at 200 Lenore St., Winnipeg, MB R3G 2C5, or e-mail [mennolit@mb.sympatico.ca](mailto:mennolit@mb.sympatico.ca)

- MCC(BC) Seniors for Peace have just published *Alternative Service for Peace in Canada During World War II 1941-1946* (pb., 375 pp.). Order from: Seniors for Peace % Editors Betty and A.J. Klassen, 1941 Valencia Court, Abbotsford, BC V2T 4M1, or e-mail [ajbklassen@uniserve.com](mailto:ajbklassen@uniserve.com) Price: C\$24.95 (inc. shipping and handling).