A Village Among the Nations: Low German Migrants and the Idea of Transnationalism in the History of Mennonites in Canada

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Introduction

How do we historians write the history of a people who simply go against the stream?[1] How do we write the Low German-speaking Mennonite migrants into a history of Mennonites in Canada?[2] Estimated to number around 300,000 persons and growing at a rapid rate, they cannot be ignored in a global history of Mennonites; and given their historic ties to Canada, they seem to demand a place in the narrative of this country's Mennonites.[3] My task in this essay is to make a case for their inclusion in the "Mennonites in Canada" story by surveying the central themes and approaches in my *Village among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006*. The context for this challenge is the well-honed paradigm of modernization. The now almost classic *Mennonites in Canada* series by Frank H. Epp and T.D. Regehr pioneered a national Canadian historic narrative, indebting future generations of historians to their work. Like histories elsewhere and

[1] This article is based on the author's Winter 2014 Bechtel lecture at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario.

[2] I use the term "Low German Mennonites" in this essay to refer to Low German-speaking Mennonite migrants, mostly members of Old Colony Mennonite Church, whose ancestors migrated from Canada to Latin America in the 1920s and '40s. The same term has been employed by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in recent decades to replace the previous term "Kanadier Mennonites." I acknowledge there are thousands of Mennonites in Canada, especially among older generations, who speak Low German but are not part of this story.

[3] This is a figure used by the Low German Ministries program of MCC Canada. By coincidence it is higher than the total number of Mennonites in Canada: 190,000 with reference to the Canadian census of 2001. About 250,000 is the figure if the total number of baptized Mennonites and Brethren in Christ baptized members, 127,000 in 2010, is doubled to account for children. See figures in Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace: A Global Mennonite History* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books; Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2012), 343.

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since then, this series hinged on the idea of modernization. It announced this historical trajectory merely with the sub-titles of its three books: "separate" for the history till 1920; then "survival" for the tumultuous '20s and '30s; and finally "transformed" for the post-World War II period.[4] It reflected a version of the classical sociological continuum of *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (society), or the anthropological model of "from closed to open."[5] And it was well grounded in the reigning Canadian history paradigm. Foremost Canadian historian Ian McKay describes this idea as the rise of the "liberal order," that is, the ascendency of the individual over the community. On the cultural side, this "order" emphasizes a more personal faith, more formal associations, a more differentiated society. On the economic side, it follows an inexorable rise of capitalism over pre-industrial moral economies, of course in measured form, allowing for some poetic critique, described by Antonio Gramsci as strong enough to register and bother but never significantly threatening.[6]

Call it "liberal," *Gesellschaft*, or "open," the final outcome of this version of the story of Mennonites in Canada has little room for the conservative, the communitarian, the closed. True, groups such as the Old Order Mennonites and the Amish have been given the role of offering quiescent harmless critiques of modernity from the periphery of society. But until recent times and with relatively few exceptions, the Low German-speaking Mennonite migrants, both communitarian in nature and migrant-oriented, have not had even this role to play.[7] They have not readily fit the trajectory of

[4] Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974); Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982); T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1996).

[5] For an example of this paradigm, see the influential work of James Urry, both his *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia* (Winnipeg: Hyperion, 1989) and his *Mennonites, Politics and Peoplehood: Europe, Russia, Canada, 1525-1980* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2006).

[6] Ian Mckay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (2000): 616-78.

[7] For earlier attempts to achieve this goal of incorporating their story into a wider Mennonite narrative, see Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, and Marlene Epp, "Pioneers, Refugees, Exiles, and Transnationals: Gendering Diaspora in an Ethno-Religious Context," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 12, no. 1 (2001): 137-53.

modernization, even as quietly bucolic, subversive voices of anti-modernity.

Nor have they wished to be part of this story. They balk at the very unfolding of a progressive, modern Mennonite mindset evident in the history of the majority of Mennonites. In fact, they insist that they are part of the Canadian story even as they hone a new identity of a "village among the nations." The one thousand or so letters appearing each year in *Die Mennonitische Post* (an MCC publication intended for the conservative and traditionalist Low German Mennonite diaspora in the Americas) testify to an imagined, dispersed village stretching from Canada to Argentina, a "virtual" community consisting of other Low German speakers, kinship networks, and bearers of a common historical narrative of a people of diaspora. I remember all too well a moment of discomfort when I sat down with the senior *Ältester* of a traditionalist church at La Crete in far northern Alberta to interview him, in Low German, for the book Steve Nolt and I were writing for the Global Mennonite History Series. He asked why I wished to interview him, and I said, with a sense of high moral purpose, that we were insisting on including the 'old orders,' the plain people, the traditionalists, in our book. Whereupon the *Ältester* said, "No thanks, we don't want to be part of your story." I was clearly not part of his "village" or his people's story. His narrative was one of leaving the acculturated Mennonites of western Canada behind when his parents chose the northern boreal forest in the 1940s, and of being connected to other conservative, communitarian-oriented migrants and their descendants scattered in the Americas. Another factor in discouraging their participation in "our" narrative is that many of these Old Colonist, Reinländer, Sommerfelder, Chortitzer, Altbergthaler, and Kleine Gemeinde migrants have wanted not only to have their cake (a Canadian passport) and eat it too. They want to be able to come to Canada seasonally as it suits them, but to escape to Mexico when the weather in the north turns cold or enough money is earned.

This narrative has undergirded their history over the last century. They rigorously resisted modernization by refusing the terms of the 1916 school legislation in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, then emigrated from Canada to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s when they didn't get their

way, speaking of finding freedom in a "land of heathens."[8] They didn't leave permanently, returning to Canada in large numbers even before the end of the first decade. Then, during the 1930s, they hinted they might come back *en masse*, protesting Mexican school closures and vainly hoping Canadian provinces might have changed their policies of assimilation since 1916. In the 1940s they embarked on an "echo" emigration, signaling that they saw a "transformed" Mennonite community in Canada as nothing more than acquiescence to unfaithfulness. In the 1950s and '60s stories trickled back to Canada of trouble in Mexico as the most conservative of these already recalcitrant people pulled up stakes and moved ever father south, first into the British Honduras rain forest and then in much larger numbers into the intemperate bush land of the Bolivian Oriente. Just as this migration to the southern "ends of the earth" ensued, thousands of others traveled in the opposite direction, northward to 'return' to Canada, usually as impoverished and dispossessed 'grapes of wrath' Mennonites moving into the heart of southern Ontario.

As the century ended, what might appear as a classic historical u-turn—south from western Canada in the 1920s, then back north to central Canada in the 1970s—became rather more complicated, as stories of poverty and ignorance in the South became fodder for a Canadian press. Alongside stories of a seemingly perpetual migration leading to a dynamic, sometimes discordant, "village among the nations," the Low German-speaking migrant community was seen to stretch across the Americas. It consisted of far northern La Crete, as well as Santa Rosa in the center of the Argentine pampa, the eastern parkland community of Northfield, Nova Scotia, the hinterland of the city of Liberal in the semi-arid plain of western Kansas, and hundreds of places in between. Even as this essay is written, the diasporic village of Low German migrants is incorporating new places in Quintana Roo near the white beaches of Cancun, Mexico, in Yacuiba, Bolivia, on the Argentine border, and on the very land vacated by their forebears south of Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

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[8] Isaak M. Dyck, "Emigration from Canada to Mexico, Year 1922," trans. Robyn Dyck Sneath, 2005 (unpublished manuscript in possession of author, 2005), 35. This material was published most recently as a book: Isaak M. Dyck, *Die Auswanderung der Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde von Kanada nach Mexiko* (Cuauhtemoc, Mexico: Imprenta Colonial, 1993).

How then do we write this story into the history of Canadian Mennonites? The fact is that even most of the 60,000 Low German-speaking, Mexico-oriented Mennonites in southern Ontario fall out of the trajectory of modernization or the liberal order for two reasons. First, most arrive in Canada with a commitment to avoid the signposts of this "transformed" Canadian Mennonite world—that is, life in medium-sized cities, institutions of higher education, global agencies of development, the arts and sciences. They remain Low German-speaking at home, assume a place as working class folk in fields and factories, and find their bearing in transplanted Old Colony and Sommerfelder churches of the south. Second, because they did not hone nation-centric lives, they don't really want to be included in the story of transformed Canadian Mennonites. Their loyalty to Canada was minimal after their ancestors blamed it for yielding to British imperial cultural imperatives and attempting to force a "militaristic" English education on their children. Nevertheless, they continued to flirt with Canada: having left the "untrue north" for the more predictable "heathen south," they kept their Canadian passports, dreamt of white Christmases in Canada, returned to it opportunistically, and abandoned it at whim.

The Low German Mennonite migrants are an Anabaptist group not at the center of a nation's history. Canada is about immigrants coming, cities growing, a middle power flourishing, multicultural polity developing, the ascendency of a liberal order. It is not supposed to be a country of people leaving, passports held pragmatically, or global links over which the government seems to have no control. This nation-centric story by definition excludes groups that do not come to stay, or those who leave, or those who engage Canada in a kind of Mennonite migrant jig. Yet excluding groups solely for this reason is similar, it seems to me, to excluding groups in previous generations that did not fit the reigning paradigms of their time.

Indeed, lately we have written subjects into the history of Mennonites in Canada because we are open to borrowing ideas of critical analysis from the wider scholarly world. Robert Zacharias's recent *Rewriting the Break Event*, on Russländer and Russländer-descendent writers, has gained traction with the employment of concepts of diaspora and post-colonialism.[9] Anne

[9] Robert Zacharias, *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian Literature* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2013).

Konrad's *Red Quarter Moon* has entered the crowded field of family and autobiographical study of Soviet Mennonite life by using methods of self-reflexivity, while Hans Werner's *The Constructed Mennonite*, along similar lines, has made its mark by problematizing "memory."[10] By daring to utilize class analysis, Janis Thiessen's *Manufacturing Mennonites* can address our refusal to acknowledge that, according to the watershed work of Kaufman and Harder, 23 percent of Mennonites in North America were working class (a similar number for those in agriculture, business, and professional fields).[11] By borrowing from the cultural construction of gender analysis employed by third generation Canadian women's historians, Marlene Epp has put another nail in the coffin of "great white man's" history and produced a sophisticated rewrite of the *Mennonites in Canada* series by inserting the word "women" in the middle of that title.[12]

We have yet to see the fruit of a recent decision by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada to produce a volume during the next five years that considers the story of "Mennonite Newcomers in Canada," focusing on the rapidly changing ethnic landscape of Mennonites in Canada since 1970, with a possible conference in 2018 on the 50th anniversary of the Society. Other terms and concepts will surely show a new Canadian Mennonite history in time, especially if we historians engage with "affect" and emotion, materiality and artifact as evocative symbol, or inter-specialty within the realm of nature.

The Transnationalism Approach

Within the constellation of critical analyses employed by the wider scholarly historical community is an approach I thought could similarly "rescue" the story of the Low German Mennonites. That concept is "transnationalism,"

[10] Anne Konrad, *Red Quarter Moon: A Search for Family in the Shadow of Stalin* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2012); Hans Werner, *The Constructed Mennonite: History, Memory, and the Second World War* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2013).

[11] Janis Thiessen, *Manufacturing Mennonites: Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2013), 4. The work that she expands on is J. Howard Kaufman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975).

[12] Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2008).

and in *Village among Nations* I lay out my hope that it can enliven and make more inclusive the story of Canadian Mennonites in the same way as diaspora, self-reflexivity, memory, class, and gender have. This concept feeds off of a cultural studies approach that upsets old normative words like "nation" as social constructions that have their life span and their own set of cultural architects.[13] While the nation-centered Mennonite history of the *Mennonites in Canada* series may have been required to critique denominationally centered histories, it still skews lived social experiences. Quite ironically, to understand the story of Mennonites in Canada we need to embrace the term "transnationalism" and understand it in its full complexity. When we do, we must see it as much more than either a "we are the trunk and you are the branches" mission history or a history of our links to Mennonite World Conference, Mennonite Economic Development Associates, SelfHelp Crafts or Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada.[14]

"Transnationalism" is a concept that invites the Low German Mennonite migrants—mostly Old Colony Mennonites—back into the fold. They may have bade Canada farewell in 1922 and moved to Mexico, but the concept of transnationalism may offer a place for their mentality, theology, and folklore that still gives many Canadian Mennonites pause, even discomfort. In it we might even find the old Anabaptist teaching of being "strangers and exiles" in this world, a concept taking its legitimate place alongside others such as the "Anabaptist vision," the "politics of Jesus," or the "Lordship of Christ."[15] With this concept, quite suddenly the central ideas of Old Colony Bishop Isaak M. Dyck, recalling the heady days from 1916 to 1922, take on new meaning. His concern was that the new English-language school legislation of 1916 would do little more than produce "an inextinguishable enthusiasm for the art of war" and lead Mennonite children to embrace the nation-centric mantra of

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[13] See Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, eds., "Introduction" in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 2005), http://epress.anu.edu.au/cw/mobile_devices/index.html, accessed August 13, 2010; Nina Glick Schiller and Linda Bash, "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68 (1995): 48–63.

[14] Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, especially chapter 12: "Discovering a Global Community."

[15] Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (1944): 67-88; 1 Peter 2:11; John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

"one king, one country, one fleet, one flag, one all-British empire: love and sacrifice for the Fatherland." The migration to Mexico, he wrote, occurred in the best spirit of Anabaptist faithfulness, that is, that "followers of Jesus were . . . born into sorrow, suffering and persecution" to a "walk in all humility and lowliness."[16] This truly Anabaptist walk was, he said, the way of the forebears in the *Martyrs Mirror,* a pathway through and beyond nations to the only homeland Christians can call home, eternal heaven. It was a transnational cosmology, apparent also in the archived diaries and memoirs of migration leaders of the 8,000 western Canadians who chose Mexico and Paraguay between 1922 and 1928.[17]

Mennonite emigrants who arrived in Mexico and Paraguay between 1922 and 1928 did not fall from the view of either curious Mennonites who stayed in Canada or Mexican commentators. In fact, the *Steinbach* [Manitoba] *Post,* a decidedly Canadian newspaper with a very small regional focus, suddenly catapulted into a paper with global reach, facilitating a transnational flow of information and tying emigrants together with those who stayed. Letters in the *Post* during that first decade in the Global South recorded the settlers' dogged commitment to trace their agrarian lines on God's earth without any new national loyalty. In a rare letter stemming from May 1924, the Mexican press heralded the newcomers from Canada as walking in the footsteps of national hero Hernando Cortez, who marched inland in 1517 from Vera Cruz after destroying his ships "as a sign of his determination to neither hesitate nor die."[18] While translated and reproduced in the *Post*, this cultural linkage to Mexico's own collective memory was unusual, as many letters served to distance the new residents from their host society. Indeed, in their missives to the *Steinbach Post*, the newcomers described transplanted village and land tenure systems that were essentially their own.

In May 1923 when a young Canadian traveller, P.K. Doerksen, visited

[16] Isaak M. Dyck, "Emigration from Canada to Mexico, Year 1922," 3, 2.
[17] In addition to Dyck, see Bernard Toews, *Reise-Tagebuch des Bernhard Toews, 1921* (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Geschichtsarchiv, Schulverwaltung der Kolonie Menno, 1997); Johan M. Loeppky, "A Travel Report to Mexico in the Year 1921," trans. Delbert Plett, in *Preservings* 26 (2006): 37-44; David Rempel, diary, 6 August 1919 - 26 November 1919, Volume 5015, trans. Jake K. Wiens (Winnipeg: Mennonite Heritage Centre).
[18] *Steinbach Post,* May 21,1924.

the new Mexican colonies, he described a land "so backwards, some of the people say that it is a hundred years behind. . . . [with] all the appearance of Bible times. . . . Here one rides on donkeys, walks bare foot, eats . . . and sleeps on the ground." Still, he writes, the Mennonites in Mexico "seem to be very happy, and when I asked what should I relay to the people in Manitoba their answer was, 'we are doing well and we are all happy; the Mexicans leave us entirely alone, only the ploughing is hard.'"[19] It was a similar situation in Paraguay, where the 1,700 settlers with a *Privilegium*, the official charter of privileges secured from President Manuel Gondra, in hand, forged up the Paraguay River beyond Asuncion to the northern post of Puerto Casado, then into the Chaco, where, as one letter writer put it in May 1927, "[tree] line cutters from our own people" will aid the surveyors.[20] The Mennonites would draw lines on God's earth. They were not imagining themselves agents of modernization or the national security of Paraguay, but the creators of a self-sufficient Mennonite community.

In the second decade the Paraguayan Mennonites may have settled in, welcoming the Fernheimers from the Soviet Union and aiding Paraguay's assault on Bolivia, but in nostalgia-laden letters they endlessly replayed sweet images of the old *Heimat*, "old Canada." The Mexican Mennonites, however, went further. Betrayed by the Mexican government, which was unable to control Pancho Villa's disbanded forces from regularly robbing Mennonites and, much worse, closing Mennonite schools for violating the Mexican constitution, they became overwhelmed by nostalgia for the old *Heimat*, especially its reputation for "peace, order and good government." In the 1930s they clashed bitterly with naysayers who reminded them that Mexico was still a culturally safer abode than modern Canada. To employ terms given theoretical meaning by Ewa Morawska, most of the Mennonites in Mexico saw in Canada not a sweet *Heimat* but a sinister *Vaterland* that had betrayed them in 1916.[21]

Thus, in May 1935 Bernhard Penner of Mexico put the debate into a transnational context: "our danger here has been much exaggerated . . . and

[19] Ibid., May 9, 1923. A similar description appears in a February 25, 1925 letter.
[20] Ibid., November 30, 1927.
[21] Ewa Morawska, "'Diasporas' Representations of their Homelands: Exploring the Polymorphs," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 6 (2011): 1029-48.

is not greater than that in Canada, indeed there it is worse." He had read about the "Bolsheviks, Communists and other demonstrators in Regina," of "demonstrations in the streets of . . . Saskatoon [where] mounted police officers have had to be called in" and trouble in Ottawa, "at the Parliament buildings [where] machine gun fire [apparently] has broken all the windows." Everywhere in Depression-era Canada one hears of a "dangerous . . . dependence on 'relief' . . . leading to corruption and laziness." His conclusion imagined a transnational world: "I see danger here, I see danger in Canada, and . . . within the whole world. So, further responses to these charges [against life in Mexico] I intend to ignore completely."[22]

Canada's patriotic participation in the Second World War and its seemingly unilinear urbanization created the context of an echo migration. The transnational nature of this migration is noticeable in the flow of information back to Canada, now not only to a German-language paper but to two nascent English language media, southern Manitoba's *Altona Echo* and the *Carillon News.* They were vehicles for northern gazes into the south, including voices of concern raised by an unlikely chorus of critics, including among others three Canadians— novelist W.O. Mitchell, sociologist Winfield Fretz, and industrialist C.A. DeFehr—and American historian H.S. Bender.

Communications and Connections

However, the stories of these progressive men of the North differed from those of the migrants themselves. By happenstance the 1940s migration yielded a number of women biographers who gave migration a gendered rendition, offering nary a deferential term for father or *Ältesten* but myriad references to health, food, cleanliness, and especially "place." While one Rosthern, Saskatchewan writer may have identified herself as "Frau Isaac F. Bergen," the migration she describes is about herself and her family of 10 children and 'father,' not about Isaac or following him.[23] Mostly it is about separation from her social space and rebuilding it in East Paraguay, an aspect of transnational mindset that immigration historian Dirk Hoerder dubs a

[22] *Steinbach Post*, May 15, 1935.

[23] Frau Isaac F. Bergen, "Reisebericht der Frau Isaak F. Bergen," in *Unsere Reise Nach Paraguay, 1948*, ed. Jacob H. Sawatsky (Sommerfeld, Paraguay: self-published, 2004): 20-37.

"transcultural" phenomenon in a supranational world.[24] Bergen's 1948 account does reference the preacher who spoke at the Rosthern farewell service, but it accentuates the emotion-laden hymn, "As Lot and Abram Separated." Concerns expressed in her diary are not so much with finances or religion but with a last lunch at the Hildebrands': when next "will we all drink so much milk?" The diary attests to a perspective of an uprooted agrarian householder who, while identifying with a spectific household and a migrating community, nevertheless emphasizes the particular aspects of migration traditionally accorded to women—sustenance and shelter. Perhaps her emphasis on these aspects is a nod to the patriarchal structure of the Mennonite community, but it also reveals a woman content not to offer any degree of deference to male leaders.

On the train to Montreal, the ship *Vollendam* to Buenos Aires, the riverboat up the Parana to Asuncion, the tarped truck into East Paraguay, the final 24 hours by ox cart, and then on foot to their patch of grass at an imagined village bearing the name Waldheim, Bergen's story is about the connection of one domestic space in Saskatchewan with another in the rainforest of South America. Along the way she tries her best to replicate domestic space, appreciates the hymns sung, frets about her children's health, cleans and grooms, and lauds strong women such as "Aunt Derk Klassen . . . a good mother and grandmother." At Waldheim, however, at a place with "grass taller than my head" close to "clear, wonderful water," she and her family come to a stop; they "spread a blanket on the ground" and have their first lunch, immediately after which they pitch their three tents. On Monday, Bergen writes, "it is usually washday, but first food is to be secured," so she "got up early, before the others, and baked biscuits."[25] Her quotidian notes do not reflect life in different nation states so much as connect two dots in a nation-less world.

The story of the 1950s and '60s takes Mexican Old Colonists farther south to British Honduras and Bolivia, and again the Canadian connection remains. Letters from the south still flood the *Steinbach Post*, extant till 1967, but another form of transnational flow of knowledge appears in the

[24] See Dirk Hoerder, "Historians and Their Data: The Complex Shift from Nation-State Approaches to the Study of People's Transcultural Lives," *Journal of American Ethnic Studies* 25, no. 4 (2006): 85-96.

[25] Bergen, "Reisebericht der Frau Isaak F. Bergen," 21, 29, 33.

form of the outsider's gaze into the communities. Young Canadian and US academics—masters, doctoral, and post-doctoral students—follow the Mennonites into the south and offer authoritative analyses.[26] Now a new voice arises within the South as well, as the national presses of the two countries offer apologias for the interloping white, German-speaking farmers in the midst of nascent nationalism. In British Honduras the *Belize Billboard* defends the Mennonites as no ragtag group of Mexican workers but "a group of Mennonites of German origin whose ancestors left Russia in 1874" who in 1922 "migrated to the state of Chihuahua in Mexico [from Canada]," [27] and now in 1957 wanted 100,000 acres "for their agricultural projects" with which to do nothing less than "build up the B.H. export trade in agricultural products."[28]

A decade later in Bolivia, newspapers such as La Paz's *El Diario* carried similar defenses. The most elaborate, by former "military man" Roberto Lemaitre F. de Córdova, saw Mennonite farming as a "military asset" since, "given the conditions of modern warfare," a country must till its "uncleared lands, populating them and making them produce." Naysayers should know that countries in which Mennonites live in "a large number . . . the United States, Canada, and Paraguay" have all "demonstrated their military strength." Paraguay, he pointedly insisted, had "encourage[d] Mennonite colonization in the Chaco," a factor in Bolivia's historic defeat in the 1932 War of the Great Thirst.[29] From the perspective of the Global South, the Mennonites were national assets (though plucked from elsewhere on the globe) and would raise the host society's international swagger (no matter

[26] See A. D. Bushong, "Agricultural Settlement in British Honduras: A Geographical Interpretation" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Florida, 1961); Jerry Alan Hall, "Mennonite Agriculture in a Tropical Environment: An Analysis of the Development and Productivity of a Mid-Latitude Agricultural System in British Honduras" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Clark University, 1970); James W. Lanning, "The Old Colony Mennonites of Bolivia: A Case Study" (M.Sc. Thesis, Texas A & M University, 1971); Edward W. Van Dyck, "Bluemenort: A Study of Persistence in a Sect" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1972); Kelso Lee Wessel, "An Economic Assessment of Pioneer Settlement in the Bolivian Highlands" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1968).

[27] *Belize Billboard*, December 4, 1957.

[28] Ibid., December 13, 1957.

[29] *El Diario,* April 5, 1968; quotes from translation in James W. Lanning, "The Old Colony Mennonites of Bolivia: A Case Study," 122-24.

that their religion forbade embracing a national identity).

Beginning in the 1950s and then increasing in each decade until the end of the century, many Mexican Old Colonists who had headed south came north instead to work in Ontario's growing food industry. It is a phenomenon, captured by theorist Steven Vertovec, that in the second half of the century a 'new' transnationalism replaced an 'old' version, a shift reflecting a crescendoing globalized rural depopulation, faster technologies of travel, and more inclusive state policies. This latter variable exhibited itself in 1979, when one of the programs of the Canadian government's new Multicultural Policy offered a major research grant to Conrad Grebel College, allowing Ronald Sawatsky, a graduate student at the time, to undertake an extensive oral history project among Old Colony Mennonites who had arrived from Mexico in Ontario as early as 1971.[30]

Among the 48 interviews conducted, Sawatsky discovered a particular collective memory of old-timers who recalled leaving western Canada in the 1920s as children, sojourning in poverty-stricken Mexico, and coming northward to a strange new place called Ontario in uncertain circumstances. Anna Peters, who left Gretna, Manitoba for Mexico at age seven with her parents in 1922, said she "remembered well" farm life, recalled "the last evening in Manitoba when we were waiting for the train," the train trip itself, how she and her father "tended to the animals . . . [in] the livestock car,"[31] and even hearing that the reason for it all was that the "church, the preachers . . . were committed to running their own schools, in our own language." Thirty-two years later, in 1954, after a generation of privation on a "small patch of land," she recalled the 12-day 'return' organized by an unscrupulous Mennonite on "a truck with a tarp tied over top [with] . . . more than forty people, five families, each with seven or eight children. . . . The truck box . . . completely full, from corner to corner," and then misery in Ontario, living illegally in a condemned, boarded up "old brick house," until friendly Port Rowan "Russlaenda" Mennonites came to the rescue with "stoves and

[30] Interviews by Ronald Sawatsky in "Mennonites from Mexico Oral History Project," organized by Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario, funded by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, deposited at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario [hereafter MAO]. All interviews were translated from Low German and transcribed by Kerry L. Fast; paper copies in possession of author.

[31] Ibid., interview #7350 with Anna and Cornelius F. Peters, May 16, 1979, Aylmer, Ontario.

clothing, bed frames, food" and avenues to soybean, tobacco and tomato field work, as "none of us had anything."[32]

A generation later Kerry L. Fast, a graduate student at the University of Toronto, conducted some 20 interviews with Old Colony Mennonite women in southern Ontario.[33] In her work a new phenomenon became apparent: northern Mexico had always been within striking distance of Canada, but improved roads and car technologies had over the decades turned 12-day road trips into 3-day affairs, now often repeated as seasonal trips. Fast's interviewees, while comfortably integrated in southern Canadian communities and fluent in English by 2006, highlighted those return trips.

Of these interviews, one with Elisabeth Rempel (a pseudonym) was typical. She was the eldest child, age seven, when her family left Zacatecas state.[34] After a summer of field work they returned to Mexico to auction off their belongings, and came back north the following summer intending on permanence in Ontario. At age 18, Elisabeth was compelled by her parents to join them back in Mexico, where she at once married a fellow Old Colony Mennonite, and together they moved to Canada, although for only a short time as "my parents were down there [and] . . . I had relatives there." Then, when Mexico could not sustain them, they fled to Kansas to work as undocumented ranch hands for two years. Desiring "somewhere [without] . . . fear that you'll be deported" and "a permanent place for our kids to grow up," they moved to Canada a third time. Each of these moves Rempel recalled as simply "terrible." The return to Mexico was especially difficult: it was "just so hard trying to adjust." She said she had wanted to stay in Canada at the time, but her mother "wouldn't have any of it. . . . She's like, 'no way, you're coming with us; you're not of age yet . . . you have to stay with us until you're at least 20.'"

[32] Ibid.

[33] Interviews by Kerry L. Fast, May 2006 in "Mexico Mennonite Women of Southern Ontario Oral History Project," funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant. All names are pseudonyms; typescript of interviews in possession of author.

[34] Interview in English with Elisabeth Rempel, May 23 and 29, 2006, Chatham, Ontario. The interviewee was about 28 years old in 2006; she was the mother to four children and married; she first left Mexico for Canada around 1985.

Die Mennonitische Post: Letters from North and South

In 1977 MCC launched an ambitious project to replicate an old medium, a regular newspaper, in the vein of the *Steinbach Post* that had ceased publication in 1967. The MCC-sponsored newspaper, *Die Mennonitische Post*, was an instant hit, and within just six years published 8,000 letters from countries comprising the Low German diaspora, now including Canada, the US, Mexico, Belize, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina. The letters spoke to the transnational nature of this community, an imagined village superimposed onto the western hemisphere, linking hundreds of close-knit places. They spoke of regular travel, nostalgia for old *Heimats*, planned relocations to unsettled regions, and of conceiving citizenship pragmatically as allowing for migration without cultural association with the new host society.

Crucial for the idea of writing Low German Mennonite history into Canadian history, the *Post* also became the platform for an extraordinary conversation, a transnational flow of information across space and a significant cultural divide. It linked accommodating Old Colony Mennonites in Ontario (and other Canadian places) with their second and third cousins in the Southern diaspora, including the most reclusive of the Low German Mennonites, the Old Colony horse-and-buggy Mennonites. In the *Post*, even the strictest traditionalists and ultra-communitarians, located in the farthest reaches of rural Latin America, spoke publicly for the first time—often in broken High German—while those most accommodated to Canadian society spoke of their own highly modern cosmologies, embracing everything their southern kin contested: ease, progress, knowledge, certainty, popularity, self-actualization, and upward mobility, including a missional paternalism sometimes couched in white-man's-burden language, an incipient invitation to celebrate their acculturation. Within the *Post* two groups of Low German speakers—those fully integrated in Canada, including service workers who had never lived in Latin America, and those resident in the Global South—engaged one another, often indirectly, but in the process introducing two diametrically different worlds.

Letters and reports from Low German-speakers in Canada spoke of life in an economically sound, multicultural country in which legal citizenship was a venerated achievement. In April 1977 the *Post* spoke of the happiness Old Colony families experienced when they finally received their citizenship, without problematizing the process or the achievement:

"Last month seventy six persons from fourteen families, all Mennonites from Mexico, ended their long wait, as they finally all received their citizenship papers." The achievement was all the more remarkable as the southern Ontarians were all "young families seeking to make a home" who became citizens only after "the intervention from various people [obtained] permission to remain in Canada."[35] Letter writers or reporters could take a more negative tack if they sensed opportunism among the newcomers: a September 1983 editorial lambasted Mennonites who "unlawfully deal with various government programs" and "benefit from programs to which they have never paid into." The editor shamed the culprits, stating that "I think at one time the name Mennonite meant more than it does today."

Generally, the stories of life in Canada were good news stories, full of self-confidence and warm welcomes. In November 1987 one *Post* contributor reported on the 'Kanadier' now settling in Winkler, Manitoba, a familiar region from which "their parents or grandparents at one time emigrated and in which one can still speak Low German," a place in which newcomers could find work in small Low German-speaking factories "with no need to speak English,"[36] close to "the Old Colony Church . . . that offers a traditional spiritual fellowship for . . . these return immigrants." They could even tune in, stated an article two years later, to Rev. Cornie Loewen's Monday night CFAM radio program geared to "recently immigrated Mennonites from Latin America, who are not yet very familiar with the English language," open to sermons on "holy living within a healthy family milieu," and willing to confront such issues as "tobacco, strong drink, marriage [trouble], depression."[37] They could assemble each year for the annual "Kanadiertreffen Days," such as the 1991 meet at Morden, Manitoba's Stanley Park, where more than 600 newcomers, conversing in "the mother tongue—Low German—happily with a bag of sunflower seeds," visited, sang "Christian songs in High German, Low German and English," and took in popular historian Gerhard Ens's talk, "The Mennonites in Russia: Yesterday and Today," learning how "through their faith in God our ancestors were able to leave behind their goods . . . and make a practical new beginning in a strange land. . . . They

[35] *Die Mennonitische Post*, April 21, 1977.
[36] Ibid., November 20, 1987.
[37] Ibid., December 15, 1989.

feared no pain and trouble when religious freedom was within reach."[38]

These reports were a cross-current with those emanating from the horse-and-buggy communities in the South. Their idea of citizenship was diametrically opposed to ideas from the North. In a not unusual letter from July 1977, Bolivian J.J. Driedger of Las Piedras, a recently established colony with La Crete, Alberta roots, answered a question he was often asked, namely "whether we are fully at home here?" The short answer, he said, was "in this world we are never fully at home. We are all on a journey to the greatest homeland and cannot make our home here."[39] Later that year, in September, another Old Colonist Mennonite signing as "the searching pilgrim" from Riva Palacios, founded by Mexican Mennonites in 1967, distinguished Bolivian and Canadian Mennonites. In Canada, as the writer recalled it, children in English language schools were "ashamed to be identified as Mennonites," reflecting the fact that their parents had snuffed out the corporate memory of "our great-grandparents and grandparents and mothers and fathers, who moved from Germany to Russia, from Russia to Canada and Mexico and so forth."[40]

From the migrant Low German point of view, Bolivia was a land of second chances, despite inflation and the lack of law and order. One writer could complain from Valle Esperanza in May 1982 that "it is not two months . . . and already money merchants on the street are paying 80 [pesos per dollar]. For flour and other essentials the prices are to be frozen so that it is cheap to obtain and still every week the prices rise."[41] Another story, from April 1983, spoke of thefts in the horse-and-buggy colonies of Swift Current, Sommerfeld, and Riva Palacios "hit by thieves with armed force" and recurring "for well over a year." Although the police were "willing to establish patrols in this region, Mennonites don't want the police in their region."[42] Indeed, Mennonites seemed willing to accept antiquated debt laws

[38] Ibid., August 1, 1991.

[39] Letter from *Die Mennonitische* Post, July 21, 1977, quoted in Lukas Thiessen, "*Land*, and *Heimat*: The Concept of Home in the Letters of Low German-Speaking Mennonites from Bolivia in *Die Mennonitische Post*" (unpublished undergraduate essay, University of Winnipeg, 2009).

[40] *Die Mennonitische Post*, August 4, 1977.

[41] Ibid., May 21, 1982.

[42] Ibid., April 15, 1983.

that meant four men from Valle Esperanza in June 1999 found themselves "imprisoned on account of debt" incurred after a "harvest failure" and given a vague promise that "the government is intervening."[43] In addition, there were problems such as a March 1992 debacle at Sommerfeld colony, where indigenous Bolivians were squatting on colony land, a "land problem" solved only when "the Indian leaders, both of whom claimed the land, traveled to the capital of La Paz and there signed an agreement, according to which the Indians will move off the land; only one man remains on the land, demanding more money."[44]

Despite these kinds of challenges, more Mennonites found homes in Latin America. When they came they still searched for the venerated *Privilegium,* hoping for official guarantees of military exemption, local government, and, if possible, their own church-run German-language schools. In December 1989 the *Post* reported on a delegation of Old Colony Mennonites from horse-and-buggy Capulin, northern Chihuahua, seeking land in Argentina. It reported that four delegates—"two colony mayors, one preacher and one deacon—who went to Argentina have come back with favourable reports," and notes a "friendly" welcome at Santa Rosa, La Pampa province, where the climate "is suitable for crop and cattle farming, similar to what they know from Mexico." At an August 22 Brotherhood meeting, "attended by those interested in emigration," the only outstanding issue yet to be settled was that "first the question of the '*Privilegium*' must be ruled on" by the Argentine government.[45]

Later that year a second delegation attempted just that, travelling to Buenos Aires to seek a personal audience with Argentine President Carlos Menem. Unable to speak with the president as he did not have time for them, they waited till November 28 or 29, when "they were supposed to have another chance" to see him. Although "it turned out to be too long a wait," nevertheless they had been "well received by the president's officials and [were told] it was not impossible to obtain a '*Privilegium*.'"[46] It was reminiscent of other meetings such as the one in 1872, when Mennonites

[43] Ibid., June 18, 1990.
[44] Ibid., March 20, 1992.
[45] Ibid., December 15, 1989.
[46] Ibid. See also ibid., May 19, 1995.

had sought an audience with the Russian Czar in St. Petersburg. When they missed him there, they went to Yalta, where they could not meet him and were told by an official that military exemption would not be possible as in the past.

Just as occasional letters from the South criticized northern acquiescence to a capitalistic, consumer culture, these letters from the North sometimes criticized authoritarian church leaders and reckless anti-modernism in the south. The two sets resembled one another, in that their respective cosmologies were spoken without reference to one another—as if they were addressed to sub-readerships within a single medium, the immigrant newspaper.

Conclusion

By borrowing the methods of a broader historical discourse, Mennonite history has often been given a broader, more inclusive mandate. Certainly, discovery of new sources has invigorated Mennonite history, as has allowing current issues of concern in the Mennonite community to guide research into the past in a search for antecedents. Moreover, borrowing new theoretical models from the wider world has promised similar positive results. Just as the very idea of a nation-centric model based on implicit engagement with theories of modernization influenced later generations of historians—recall the words "separate," "struggle," and "transformed"—so has engaging the methods of social history and cultural studies enabled today's historians to write more iterations of the Mennonite experience into the narrative of Mennonites in Canada.

Ironically, one of the fruitful concepts is transnationalism, and its promise is multifaceted. It may allow historians to see any group of Canadian Mennonites within a wider global context of dislocated, ethno-religiously connected members of various diasporas. In addition, it can allow them to reconsider the appropriateness of employing nation-centric paradigms for the study of a people who by their very lives have critiqued such models over the centuries. As well, it may permit historians to revisit the very idea of Anabaptism, and to emphasize not only the ideas of love, community, and peace but also "pilgrimage" and aloofness from patriotism. As this essay has argued, it specifically permits the inclusion in our national narrative of the

large, rapidly growing, reticent Low German population of Ontario, and its Canadian-passport-carrying close kin in the Americas.

Transnationalism overcomes the binary opposition of "Canada vs. the US" and the sometimes forced connection between Ontario and western Canada. It allows for the flow of information across national borders, and for the transcultural or supranational identities of villagers among the nations. Perhaps it can also suggest a way to conceptualize a community whose story has too often been filtered by well-intended missionaries and professionals who produce narratives of social pathology to contextualize their own work. Finding ways to analyze the nature of a community solely to understand how it has survived, adapted, and reinvented itself should always be a historian's central mission. Writing the Low German diaspora into the fabric of the Canadian Mennonite story can, we may hope, identify the account of "a village among the nations" as part of the story of "our village within this nation."

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