

Provenance

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8. *Overcoming the Depression*

Outstanding in the life of the Mennonite people is the practice of mutual aid in time of distress and loss. We have literally tried to do good to all men, but especially to those of the household of faith as the apostle enjoined— L.J. BURKHOLDER.¹

Cooperation truly succeeds only when the people see in it a great social enterprise and are gripped by the desire for justice and the will to make the world a better place in which to live— J.J. SIEMENS.²

UNDIVIDED CANADIAN attention to the disaster facing the Mennonites in the Soviet Union was impossible in view of the calamitous onslaught in the 1930s of the world-wide economic depression. The international and national financial paralysis affected the Mennonites, particularly on the Canadian prairies, in diverse ways and brought forth a variety of responses to ensure survival. Old forms of co-operation and mutual aid were revived and strengthened, and some new forms were devised, partly to replace what had once been and partly to deal with the new circumstances. Mennonite individualism likewise manifested new vigour, as some resisted the dole both for themselves and for others, and as hundreds of families took to the road once again in search of a more promising land.

The thirties were a ten-year period like no other in Canadian history.³ It was a very bad time for agriculture and business, and the number of workers unemployed exceeded one-tenth of the labour

force for almost every year of the decade. Any assessment of the disastrous meaning of the unemployment statistics must take into consideration that with few exceptions the unemployed were the sole breadwinners in their families and that they had no unemployment insurance or standing welfare programs to turn to. In 1933, unemployment actually rose to 20 per cent. Recovery from that apocalyptic year was slow and uneven and far from complete when the Second World War began.

For western, particularly Saskatchewan, farmers the depression was a crushing ordeal.⁴ Everything seemed to go wrong at once. The weather was abnormal, and dust storms, rather than blizzards, swirled through village streets in midwinter. In summer, the fields baked and cracked under scorching, rainless skies. Blanket infestations of grasshoppers and caterpillars added to the rural miseries. Hostile natural forces were only part of the farmer's sorrows, because the market on which his livelihood depended experienced a catastrophic collapse. Prices offered for the cereal crops were appallingly low, and some households used their meagre harvests as a source of winter fuel.

The collapse of the wheat market, accompanying the stagnation of world trade and finance, was as central to the depression as the development of wheat for export had been to the Canadian economic boom prior to the Great War. After a temporary post-war slump in the wheat economy, the market had again picked up, and in 1928, the peak year of the 1920s, farm cash income from the sale of wheat was \$451 million. Put in other terms, it represented 7.4 per cent of the GNP and 40 per cent of total farm income.⁵ As in all previous decades, so in the 1920s wheat production had increased, 22 per cent in the first five years and 16 per cent in the last five.

The 1930s saw a complete reversal of that trend. In the first five years, production fell 26 per cent and in the second half of the decade another 15 per cent.⁶ The drastic decline in wheat prices and the prices of all other farm produce exacerbated the situation. From the peak in 1928 to the ebb in 1933 agricultural income fell by almost 80 per cent.⁷ One legend has it that a southern Manitoba farmer took his load of grain with horse-drawn wagon over 30 miles to Emerson, there to be offered 25 cents "for relieving him of the load."⁸ And according to another chronicler:

In 1929 wheat sold for \$1.13 a bushel, but by 1931 the price had dropped to 29 cents per bushel and in 1932 farmers got only 19 cents per bushel. Cattle prices also declined in the same way and hogs sold for 1½ cents per pound.⁹

History had taught the Mennonites to accept and adjust to adversity. While not all acknowledged suffering as a normal Christian or human experience essential for the fulfilment of divine purpose or even as a virtue to be sought, few believed that continuous prosperity was a divine right or even a proper expectation. God would take care of His children if they would do their share. While some accepted relief, "even when the need was not so desperate," others felt "that they had no right to take relief if they had any other way of helping themselves."¹⁰ Thus, the days of the depression were for the most part not characterized by a lazy waiting for better times but by harder work and the application of all those measures which the instinct of survival suggested as pointing in the right direction. This included, above all, belt-tightening and the reduction of whatever "luxuries" had already been accepted.

One example of such adjustment lay in gasoline-powered transportation and farming. When the depression struck, tractors and cars had in many places replaced horses for field work and transportation. Because the economic crisis made cars unaffordable, they were converted into wagons with rubber tires by removing the motor, leaving the car body or replacing it with the box of a lumberwagon, attaching a pole and a doubletree to it, and hitching horses to the doubletree. Bennett buggies they were called, after R.B. Bennett, who had the misfortune of being Canada's prime minister during those fateful years, but whose ability to remain in good humour even during difficult times represented a unique qualification for the task.¹¹ A popular two-wheeler created from half a car frame was named after J.T.M. Anderson, the Saskatchewan premier.

There were more Bennett buggies and Anderson carts in Saskatchewan than anywhere else, because that is where the depression hit the hardest and continued the longest, bringing impoverishment and dependence on emergency relief to tens of thousands. When the task of relieving economic distress became too much for both the municipal and the provincial governments, the extra-governmental Sas-

katchewan Relief Commission was created to achieve a fair and equitable distribution of the relief available from all sources. Food was distributed, especially flour for bread, as well as clothing ranging from \$2.50 worth per infant per year to \$9.00 per adult with a maximum of \$75 per family. Fuel, medical aid, and feed and fodder for livestock were also distributed and, in due course, seed grain to help farmers get started again.¹² The Relief Commission came to an end with the 1934 provincial election, but relief was needed and carried on by various branches of the provincial government throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, as families and fields impoverished for so many successive years could not easily be rehabilitated. The reluctance with which most Mennonites needing relief accepted it is reflected in the memoirs of Ernest A. Jeschke:

This [the 1937 crop year] brought us to the humiliating position where we stretched out our hands for "relief." Of course we were very reluctant to take that step, but we had six children all school age.¹³

By and large, the provincial governments were poorly equipped — philosophically, politically, structurally, and financially — to cope with the depression. After bailing out the wheat pools, which had paid the farmers more than the wheat was later worth, the governments of the prairie provinces were under great pressure to balance their budgets. In Saskatchewan, the Relief Commission was a limited operation and of limited duration.¹⁴ In Manitoba, the Liberal-Progressive government of John Bracken was able to maintain relief and old age pensions only by imposing a two per cent tax on all wages and salaries.¹⁵ In Alberta, the newly established Social Credit government neglected to implement its promise of a monthly 25-dollar dividend to all citizens.¹⁶ In Ontario, the Liberal government of Mitchell Hepburn promised reform but much of its energy went into cutbacks and the balancing of budgets.¹⁷ Most progressive in terms of public spending, both for relief and for job-creating works, was the Liberal government of Thomas Dufferin Pattullo in British Columbia.¹⁸

The distribution of direct relief "was supplemented by . . . church organizations, fraternities, welfare groups, and generous individuals."¹⁹ In the first third of the depression decade alone, 577

carloads of fruit, vegetables, and clothing were donated by charitable people throughout Canada and shipped without cost by the railways. Among these carloads of donated produce, four filled with potatoes and other garden products were collected by the Mennonites of Waterloo County and distributed along with 42 bales of clothing in southern Saskatchewan communities.²⁰ Much clothing also arrived from the churches in the U.S.A., an average of 15,000 pounds a year. During one fall and winter, for example, one American shipment of 17,772 pounds of clothing was distributed among 646 families.²¹ Such help was absolutely essential because distributors found children without stockings or shoes even in the coldest winter months.²² From northern Saskatchewan came three carloads of potatoes. From Alberta five carloads of baled straw were sent to feed the cattle of Mennonite farmers in southern and central Saskatchewan, the parts hit hardest.²³

Such concern had its origins in, and was undergirded by, the theology of the church, which stressed the moral obligation to do good to all people.²⁴ Though church-based mutual aid had a strong tradition in all Mennonite groups, the particular problems of the 1930s led to departures from particular practices. The Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada, for instance, resolved that its treasury for the poor should serve not only its own congregations, but also people in need who were not members anywhere.²⁵ Another example of deliberate extension beyond the borders was the sewing-circle movement, in the 1930s at its peak particularly in Ontario.²⁶ More formally known as the Women's Missionary Society, the movement excelled in sewing clothes for Toronto's "fresh air children," visiting the sick, providing home nursing services, comforting bereaved families, feeding the hungry, and gathering used garments for destitute people.

Mutual aid in all its forms was tried and tested, and, while institutional relief and collections in distant places made a great deal of difference, it was neighbourhood helpfulness and community solidarity which mattered most. Some of the care that neighbours had for each other in an earlier era was recalled and revived. In the Grunthal area, for instance, every farmer knew about "*Schmett Toews en Gruentol*" (Blacksmith Toews in Grunthal), because that was one place where farmers who had broken machinery and who were too poor to buy new implements could get some help. And the

charges were according to the times. Schmett Toews expected no more than 50 cents for what had formerly been a ten-dollar job.²⁷

Isolated Fields: Alberta

Good-neighbourliness, however, was not enough to keep Mennonites in place. They left the depressed wheat fields by the hundreds. And if they did not leave the fields, they left the wheat, as in southern Manitoba, where heavy dependence on grain now gave way to diversification.²⁸ In all the prairie provinces, there was scattered movement towards northern brushland areas, where the soil retained the moisture better, where agriculture always was and remained diversified, and where nature in the form of berries or wild animals provided some source of sustenance. The drought and the grasshopper plague in southern Saskatchewan resulted in a near-panic flight from the south to the north where there was more grass and feed and where there were better hopes of getting through the winter with cattle and family. Large tracts of land in the Meadow Lake area were being looked at in 1934 as possible areas of settlement.²⁹ But the more significant movements were from the grain farms of the prairies to the fruit orchards and the vegetable and tobacco farms of southern Ontario, and even more to the fruit and dairy farms of the British Columbia lower mainland.

In the 1930s, the Mennonite population in Canada increased by 22,818—from 88,736 to 111,554—resulting in increases in all the provinces, from Ontario to British Columbia. Even Saskatchewan gained more than 1,200. However, as a fraction of the total, Saskatchewan declined from 35.3 per cent to 29.2 per cent, while British Columbia, in quadrupling its Mennonite population, moved up from 1.2 per cent to 4.6 per cent of the total. What was equally significant was that the 1930s represented the beginning of a trend which continued in the 1940s, when the Saskatchewan fraction declined to 21 per cent and the British Columbia portion of the total moved up to 12 per cent.

For some, and this was true especially in the Hague-Osler area, the economic reasons for moving were reinforced by the impulses of religion and the search for cultural isolation which persisted in spite of the movements to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s. Those who stayed in Canada were leaderless and frustrated at first, but by 1930 the Reinlaender remnant had regrouped and renamed itself the

Altkolonier Mennonitengemeinde (Old Colony Mennonite Church), selected a new bishop, and begun confidently to build for the future.³⁰ However, the issue of isolation from society and of accepting the public school had not been fully resolved.

In the Mennonite community, as in society generally, no issue was ever solved for all time. New circumstances, or second thoughts about old circumstances, tended to produce a fresh division of opinion. There was, after all, no conservative faction so unanimous and cohesive that it could not ultimately give rise to some progressive thought, and there was no grouping of progressives that was not capable of some conservatism in the ranks. Indeed, each issue always had at least two sides to it, and whenever Mennonites insisted on turning one side or the other into rigid truth, they guaranteed the emergence, sooner or later, of another point of view. Thus, while the emigration had separated those who were in favour of leaving Canada and those who were against it, both those who left and those who stayed had second thoughts. In Latin America some people were thinking of coming back to Canada. And among the *Altkolonier* and *Bergthaler(S)* of the Hague-Osler area there were those who continued to fear absorption into the world, even though at an earlier time that fear had not been strong enough to cause the total uprooting that emigration required.

Should a greater isolation be possible within Canada, that would be another matter. The coming, and settlement in their midst, of the *Russlaender* started second thoughts precisely in that direction. On the one hand, the colonization agents working for the *Russlaender* had once again identified the vast Peace River district as a settlement possibility. On the other hand, the *Russlaender* represented a new threat. As far as some *Bergthaler(S)* and *Altkolonier* were concerned, a new element of worldliness, as they perceived it, had been added by the settlement of the *Russlaender* in their midst. It seems that the *Kanadier* were extremely disquieted by the presence of the immigrants, regarded by them as liberals who had not maintained intact the traditional values. A legal firm representing a group of Hague-Osler Old Colony people looking for land informed the Alberta authorities that

the reason for their desire to move westward is that the new Mennonites who have come in from Russia since the war have proved a somewhat disturbing element, disturbing, at any rate, to their religious and home life idea.³¹

Inquiries regarding the possibility of settlement in the Peace River District were made late in the 1920s by a number of Kanadier groups with the help of J.J. Hildebrand of the Canadian National Settlement Association.³² Despite several attempts to win education-related privileges for themselves, these groups failed to extract any special concessions from the Alberta government.³³ None the less, some families elected to move northward. They believed that a temporary reprieve from cultural intrusion was better than none at all and such a possibility existed in the northland.

The successive Alberta governments, both United Farmers and Social Credit, did not organize public schools where none existed or enforce compulsory school attendance legislation against the wishes of the local populace. In this, Alberta was quite different from Manitoba and Saskatchewan. There was in Alberta also less rigidity in curriculum-related matters. Private schools, like Prairie Bible Institute at Three Hills, could become fully accredited without reference to Shakespeare or "other worldly authors." In the English classes of PBI, only the writings of evangelical missionaries and preachers were used.³⁴

In 1930, representatives of about 300 families at Hague-Osler and in southern Manitoba inspected lands along the Peace River, north of the town of Peace River. Special attention was given to an area in townships 97, 98, 101, immediately east of a small town called Carcajou. A certain Mr. Elias actually settled in Carcajou at the time and began to cut a road and await further settlers.³⁵ He was followed in 1932-33 by five other families from the Hague-Osler area. These pioneers praised the isolation of the northland and encouraged others to join them. But they also came to the early conclusion that the river valley flatlands of Carcajou, being too wet too long at the wrong time, were not the best choice.

Thus, in 1934 they moved farther north near the small trading post of Fort Vermilion on the east side of the Peace River. Others were on their way. In May of that year it was reported at the town of Peace River that four railroad cars of effects, including 25 head of cattle and horses, together with a large quantity of farm machinery, had arrived as a vanguard of a large movement to follow, and that over 300 quarter sections of land had been secured on long-term lease.

The first manifestation of the permanent settlement appeared at

Buffalo Head Prairie,³⁶ also known as Rosenort.³⁷ Then settlement expanded north about 40 miles to include the communities of La Crete, Blumenort,³⁸ and Rheinland, the latter nearest to Fort Vermilion.³⁹ While the numbers arriving were small,⁴⁰ the Kanadier movement once again opened up the Peace River District as a possible happy settlement option for others.

Among those selecting the northern wilderness as their new home were returnees from Mexico who were having second thoughts about their transfer to that country. In the fall of 1935, Bishops Isaak M. Dyck and Jacob Peters, with 13 ministers and 3 laymen, were consulting by mail with their former lawyers in Morden about a return to "the old beloved fatherland Canada."⁴¹ Their schools had been closed since the month of June by the authorities and this caused them "more grief and suffering than the loss of our earthly goods" because "we find ourselves deceived in our expectations." Thirteen years of "hardships and molestations from the Mexican people" had been difficult to bear, but even more problematic was the establishment "of socialistic schools by law from which law the Mennonites are not exempted."

A wholesale return to Canada was being considered, perhaps to the Peace River District, but not unconditionally so. The guarantee of "our own private schools" and "complete exemption from any kind of military service" were the two main conditions of return set forth, in accordance with "the customs of the forefathers" which could not be sacrificed "without hurting our conscience." The desire to return to Canada, however, was unequivocally strong:

. . . it would be our delight and joy to return to our old home, and no sacrifices, hardships, or labours would be too difficult for us to change the open and unsettled prairies of the far north with the blessings of Almighty God into fruitful cultivated fields. . . . And, because Canada has been to us and our ancestors a loving and well-meaning mother, who has had much patience and forbearance with the sins and transgressions of our people, so we would in the future seek the best of the state and the country.⁴²

Bishop Jacob Abrams, along with three preachers and one deacon, addressed a petition directly to Ottawa and stated six conditions essential to the return of their group. They included administration

of "our schools and churches ourselves with the use of German, our school and church language," the ownership of school and church property, the right to found a *Waisenamt* (an administration for the welfare of orphans), exemption from military service or any war services whatsoever, release from the oath and courts of justice, and —the paradox of the request probably escaped the petitioners— "the protection of the law for our property and also our life."⁴³ Such protection was normal in Canada but not, as the Mennonites had already many times discovered, in Mexico.

These and other petitioners⁴⁴ were given both favourable and unfavourable reports. They were told that the Militia Act allowed individuals to claim exemption from military service, that crown lands could no longer be reserved for colony settlements, that public homestead lands were administered by the provinces, and that there was no problem in readmitting Mennonites who were British subjects, being Canadian-born or naturalized. Because the immigrants to Mexico had retained their Canadian citizenship, there was no problem on that account. And children born in Mexico were also eligible for Canadian citizenship, though the parents rarely documented their choices in this respect. Officials warned that Mexican-born children would be examined at the port of entry and readmitted only if they were "in good mental and physical health and in possession of a passport."⁴⁵

Meanwhile, efforts were also made in Mexico to clarify the status of the *Privilegium* in that country. The result was that the schools were reopened in January of 1936.⁴⁶ However, emigration sentiment did not end. Thoughts of returning to Canada from Mexico reached a high point in February of 1936, when throngs of Mexicans marched through the streets of Cuauhtemoc, demanding "expulsion of the clergy and establishment of socialistic education."⁴⁷ While their agitations were aimed as much at the Catholic clergy as at anybody else, the Mennonite bishops knew that their schools too could be affected.

There were other problems. Roving thieves were taking advantage of Mennonite nonresistance, breaking into the homes of the defenceless settlers, and in one instance killing two of them. Government agents told Mennonites to shoot the robbers, but Bishop Dyck insisted "that bearing arms is against our religion."⁴⁸ The Mennonites also refused to go to court and, in one situation, paid a colony

debt a second time rather than resort to the law. There were, of course, Mexicans who appreciated the Mennonites. The victims of the Tampico flood and others benefited from their occasional external charity. They could be relied upon to keep their word, and the businessmen of Cuauhtemoc knew best the source of their livelihood:

Only the Mennonites can farm successfully here. There was no town here before they came. There will be none if they leave.⁴⁹

A mass movement did not materialize, but scores of families did return to Canada, some of them to their former settlements and others to communities not too far away, as at MacGregor and Spencer in Manitoba. However, most of the returnees took up homesteads in the Fort Vermilion area until the world war brought the movement to a stop, at least for the time being.

In the 1930s, some Russlaender were taking another look at the Peace River area, primarily because of the social separation it offered. This was particularly true at Coaldale, where the tensions of the mid-1920s had not been fully resolved and were ready to flare up at any provocation. In April 1934, it was noted that "the Mennonites at Coaldale have been unsettled" because of the "bad feeling between the original settlers and the Mennonites" which continued to express itself mainly with respect to school matters. The Mennonite school population was about half of the total, yet Mennonite land holdings in terms of acreage were comparatively small, and thus the immigrants were believed not to be paying their share of the school taxes.

Aggravating the situation was the strong Mennonite presence on the school board. At one point, Mennonites had three members, in other words, the majority, and, "while their actions at that time were very careful and they did not offend any one, much capital was made of the situation."⁵⁰ Campaigning against their re-election, and particularly against their strongest member, Jacob B. Janz, a brother of B.B. Janz, was Norman Priestley, the local United Church minister.⁵¹ Priestley was also vice-president of the United Farmers of Alberta during the 1930s, and in 1932 in Calgary he was elected secretary of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (a farmer-labour-socialist party). The following year he presented the Regina Manifesto to the founding convention of the CCF. Priestley stressed

collectivist economic policies which could not be tolerant or respectful of minority interests and concerns. He could not allow individualism to stand in the way of collectivist policies supported by a progressive majority of the electorate. The majority, in yet another sense, was British, hence his nativism, which stood in the way of respecting cultural minorities.⁵²

When one by one the Mennonites, including Jacob Janz, were ousted from the school board, "it annoyed him so much" that he and others thought that the Mennonites would have to leave Coaldale. Thus, they too were eyeing opportunities in the northland.⁵³ The Canada Colonization Association, however, discouraged any moves because of "all the difficulties you would have to be put up against in connection with the homestead lands." Besides:

this antagonistic attitude will gradually disappear. It has done so in other cases and . . . patient effort and consistent citizenship . . . will cure the difficulties. . . . it will be much better for the Mennonite people of Coaldale to stay with it and overcome these prejudices than it would be for them to run away and practically bury themselves under backwoods conditions for a generation . . .⁵⁴

Coaldale restlessness continued, however, but the people turned their eyes to southern British Columbia instead of northern Alberta.⁵⁵ Factionalism within the Coaldale Brethren Church helped that process along. As with Abraham and Lot in the Old Testament, a geographic separation was always one way for Mennonites to resolve their differences.

The northern frontier, where the winters were long and the growing season was extremely short, was difficult even for the hardiest of pioneers, such as the Kanadier always were. Once again, wells had to be dug by hand, wheat had to be ground for bread, and animal skins and sheep's wool had to be converted into footwear and garments. And markets had to be found for produce and the ways of river shipping had to be learned. Yet the rewards were sweet. The soil produced richly, up to 117 bushels of oats per acre. Weeds were scarce and so were pests such as potato bugs. But most important of all, the desired isolation from worldly influence and from the rigid enforcement of education laws had been found.

Greener Fields and Co-ops: B.C. and Ontario

The north was a refuge good enough to commend itself to other Mennonites, and in due course new settlements were also founded in north-central British Columbia, when at the end of the depression decade Mennonites were still on relief and economic prospects for them remained dim. The new communities in Cheslatta and Vanderhoof, though in part a consequence of the depression, were not established until the 1940s and therefore are best described in the context of that later period.

The new settlements of the Kanadier in northern Alberta and central British Columbia were the most significant new ones coming out of the depression. But they were not the only ones, inasmuch as individual families and groups of families pushed into brushland areas in Saskatchewan as well as Manitoba, as is indicated by the new congregational units established during this time. Other Kanadier and the Russlaender too were moving around as a result of the hard times, but for them other areas held a greater attraction than the north. The people at Coaldale eyed the Peace River District only in passing, and some Russlaender already there, as at Lymburn, were beginning to join the movement either to British Columbia or to Ontario. The same was true in the CPR brushlands in northern Saskatchewan, but no exodus was sufficiently complete to end the settlements or the congregations there.

The story was different at Reesor in northern Ontario, once the hope of all those who had visions of restoring, however partially, the Mennonite commonwealth. The end of Reesor did not come in the 1930s, but the beginning of the end could be foreseen in 1936 when Jacob C. Toews, one of the original pioneers and community leaders, left for Essex County in the south and thereby set in motion an exodus which saw 12 families leave in 1937 alone.⁵⁶

In the early years of the depression, the Reesor settlers were not affected that much by the drought and the collapse of the wheat markets. Later, however, the orders for pulpwood declined, and a livelihood from the produce of the farms proved highly unlikely, partly because of the remoteness of the markets and partly because the government refused concessions on homestead lands, which would have allowed individual farmers to expand their acreages. The community was also wracked by internal dissension. Thus, when the

"push" from Reesor was added to the "pull" of southern Ontario, the temptation to move to Essex County or the Niagara Peninsula became irresistible.⁵⁷

Once Mennonites from the prairies had discovered the orchards of the Niagara Peninsula, they migrated in droves and set up new economic institutions. The Virgil community received its first settlers in 1935, but by the next decade, approximately 300 families made the area their home as parts of whole communities were transplanted.⁵⁸

The migrations to Ontario and British Columbia led not only to the expansion of existing communities and the establishment of new ones but also to new experiments in economic co-operation, which arose not so much from the ideology of the co-operative movement as from very practical considerations. In the establishment of co-operatives, the Mennonites followed patterns already entrenched in Canada.⁵⁹ The co-op movement, both on the prairies and in Ontario, dated back to the late nineteenth century. In Ontario, co-op cheese factories, creameries, and mutual insurance companies were in vogue, whereas on the prairies the primary focus was on grain marketing. The twentieth century also saw the emergence of co-op livestock marketing organizations, poultry growers, and creameries. Creameries were organized among Mennonites in Manitoba before the Russlaender arrived.⁶⁰

The ultimate objectives of the co-operative movement varied with the proponents. There were some who believed the co-ops would simply cure a fault in the free-enterprise system, namely the existence of and exploitation by monopolies. Others seemed to regard monopolies as an integral part of the capitalist system and wanted to see the co-ops replace private enterprise. Put another way, there were practical co-operators and there were doctrinaire co-operators. For most Mennonites—there were important exceptions, to be discussed later—the doctrinaire co-operators held little appeal. The Mennonites clearly preferred practical solutions to urgent local problems rather than grandiose schemes to replace the capitalist system.

The Russlaender, in their various communities, became part of the post-war expansion of the co-op movement, but it is important to note that they generally formed their own co-ops. The Mennonites of the 1930s were not yet ready to join the charitable organizations and co-operatives of their fellow Canadians. For several decades parallel

institutions existed, owing partly to the WASPish nature of other organizations, partly to the clannishness of Mennonites themselves. And as long as they didn't need others for their own success, there was no great incentive to include them or to join them. A consumers' and producers' co-op established at Virgil enabled the fruit growers to market their produce at reasonable prices and to avoid excessive spoilage.⁶¹ The co-op also served the community in a variety of other ways and ultimately became the foundation for a prosperous community credit union begun by Mennonites.⁶²

Similar initiatives were undertaken in British Columbia.⁶³ A consumers' and fruit growers' co-operative was organized at Yarrow to operate a general store, a feed- and grain-buying business, and a berry-packing and -preserving plant.⁶⁴ Soon, over 2,000 barrels of raspberries, each containing 400 pounds, were being processed, trucked to Vancouver, then shipped by railway to eastern Canada and by boat to overseas markets.⁶⁵ The success of these ventures in turn prompted the founding of a credit union, a co-operative egg-grading and -marketing plant, a feed-mixing and -grinding mill, a creamery and cheese factory, and a jam factory.

During his visit to British Columbia, sociologist J. Winfield Fretz, on a Mennonite Central Committee assignment to study settlement- and community-building, identified at least eight different Mennonite co-operatives in the Fraser Valley. All of them were factors in the early stability and prosperity of the Fraser Valley settlements. According to pioneer Aaron A. Rempel, who had come to the valley from Russia via Mexico and Saskatchewan, "the use of co-operative techniques when starting a settlement is a 50 per cent guarantee of its success."⁶⁶

The Co-op Movement in Manitoba

Co-ops were founded for very practical reasons, especially in the new settlements, but occasionally and particularly in southern Manitoba, the co-op ideology was also a motivating factor. The movement, which sprang up among the Kanadier in the West Reserve area, was a necessity borne of the depression, but it was also inspired by the international co-op philosophy, the work of the movement in Canada,⁶⁷ and the heritage of Mennonite mutual aid.⁶⁸

Even the most productive Mennonite land areas experienced some

of the worst features of the depression. Like many other westerners, the people here had been influenced in their policies by the post-war wheat boom. In their haste to capitalize on the soaring markets, few people bothered to assess the future consequences of a wholesale commitment to a single-crop economy, or the trend to consolidate large acreages under single owners. One of the first casualties claimed by the wheat bonanza was the old-time family farm. Diversity, and the accompanying self-sufficiency, had formerly characterized most farming operations. The shift to commercial wheat farms changed all this and mechanized farming, conducted on a large scale, divested the farmers of the time that was needed to maintain milk cows, hogs, chickens, and pasture crops. The sudden demise of the barnyard animal signified that farmers had taken a giant step towards reducing their own independence and had bound themselves to the whims and uncertainties of a market over which they had little control. The independence of the farmers was further impaired by their growing reliance on the petroleum industry.

The following statistics reveal in part the grim path along which agriculture was headed: of 1,240 farmers residing in the Rhineland Municipality, over half (626) were in danger of losing title to their holdings through foreclosures or bankruptcy; 455 households were so heavily in debt that they were obliged to turn over one-half of their annual crop to mortgage companies or other mortgage holders; the number of tenant farmers was growing daily, eventually leaving only 13 per cent of the farmers retaining clear title to their lands.⁶⁹

It was against this distressing background of economic, and the accompanying social, attrition that a small group of concerned men met in Altona in January 1931. The participants, representing different villages, various occupations, and the different churches, all agreed that their once-prosperous area was in imminent danger of decline. Farming seemed to hold no future. For people who had been tied to the soil for generations, and who had come to regard farming as their divine calling, this was a troubling proposition to accept.

The consensus at the meeting was that a massive agricultural reorganization was necessitated by the situation. Specifically, the need was for greater farm diversity that would feature the introduction of new crops, better cultivation and tillage practices, and the return or improvement of livestock and poultry flocks. In order to better facilitate the contemplated reforms, the Rhineland Agricultural Society was organized.⁷⁰

At the heart of this new initiative stood J.J. Siemens, whose economic and social contribution to southern Manitoba was reminiscent of the work of Johann Cornies in southern Russia a century earlier.⁷¹ Born in 1896 in the Schoenthal district near Altona, he was destined to pioneer as his immigrant father before him had done, though in a different way. After graduating from the Mennonite Educational Institute in Altona and the Normal School in Winnipeg, he taught for ten years, taking up farming when his father retired.⁷²

A strong believer in the psalmist's declaration that "the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof,"⁷³ Siemens advocated better stewardship of the soil and himself "experimented with many types of crops, sometimes using unorthodox methods of farming."⁷⁴ A public-spirited citizen, he was a man of great vision who established numerous co-ops, as well as the Rhineland Agricultural Society (RAS), which, as an educational force for economic co-operation, became the forerunner of the Western Co-operative College in Saskatoon.⁷⁵

Since one of its principal functions was to educate, the RAS considered it vital to be closely allied with the provincial and federal departments of agriculture. Such policy would today seem commonplace and sensible. In 1931, however, the announcement was viewed by many as a bold break with the past. Mennonites were proud of their long tradition of self-reliance and their capacity to survive and prosper, using their own resources. The more reluctant Mennonites maintained that to solicit outside help was to admit to serious internal weaknesses and to invite unnecessary outside influence.

RAS officials, Siemens especially, objected to such reasoning. In his view it was outright folly to refuse proffered assistance that could well prove to be the farmers' salvation. While he appreciated and valued his heritage, Siemens realized the error of foolishly and stubbornly clinging to antiquated practices. He advised the Mennonites to observe and learn from the laws of nature, which were constantly altering the world around them, and from those who had insights to pass on:

... we need to learn the techniques of farming but we need to learn first that techniques change. We must learn to keep abreast of our times, to keep our minds young, to experiment. We must learn how to learn, and let learning stop only when life stops.⁷⁶

The RAS-sponsored programs soon produced results. Junior and adult agricultural clubs were organized, lectures, study sessions, films, essay contests, and tours to various experimental farms were offered, picnics and fairs were held. New crops such as corn, sugar beets, peas and other row vegetables, flax, potatoes, and sunflowers took hold on the land. Dairy herds were boosted, purebred hogs were introduced, and veterinarians were brought in. Other less tangible benefits accrued as increasing numbers of people became infected by the enthusiasm generated by the RAS. Troubles, if not always erased, were at least temporarily forgotten, as individuals worked together planning new programs or studying new techniques. Siemens was pleased with the regenerated agricultural spirit which saw new possibilities and prompted new initiatives:

We began to feel that there were many things we could best do for ourselves. We had become community conscious and desirous of leaving the "Beaten Track."⁷⁷

There were also those who recommended that the principles of collective organization could be extended to combat the most offensive features of private enterprise. It was said that the free-enterprise system, as originally designed, had taken a wrong turn and had evolved into a greedy monster. Ordinary citizens were left too much at the mercy of giant companies more interested in padding their already fat bank accounts than in serving the public fairly. A suggested corrective to such economic injustices was to place the distribution of goods more immediately within the control of the consumers.

Thus, the organization in 1931 of the unpretentious Rhineland Consumers Co-operative Ltd. marked the beginning of another movement which, complemented by the work of the RAS, would help to transform an impoverished district into the "Niagara" of Manitoba. Undaunted by the largely negative, mostly sceptical, and sometimes hostile reception of the co-op in the community, the original 67 members pledged themselves to the cause, along with a precious sum of \$10 per member. The co-op's first order of business was to reduce the gas, fuel, and binder twine prices. A simple strategy was devised and the group purchased an existing oil station in Altona, then bought the needed products in bulk in Winnipeg. This led to substantial savings for the membership.⁷⁸

Progress was slow but steady. The turning point for the Altona movement came in 1937. That year, the co-op returned to its members the first cash dividends. Sceptics now suddenly became believers as there was a rush to be included on the co-op's enrolment list. The gasoline co-op's proven ability to survive as a viable business effort, while rendering to its members real savings, produced a chain reaction. Other communities realized the value of the co-op system and requested help in establishing their own. A decade after the Altona venture came into being, there were 13 local co-ops in the West Reserve district offering a wide range of services to their members including retail stores, cheese factories, creameries, egg-grading stations, and machine repair shops.

The co-operative spirit arising from the depression also prompted the Mennonites to join the national and international credit union movement, and to found "people's banks" of their own, notably the Crosstown Credit Union in Winnipeg, whose membership was limited to Mennonites.⁷⁹ In such towns as Altona, Winkler, and Steinbach, the credit unions were led by Mennonites, who also represented the strongest membership base, but these community credit unions were open to all.

Siemens was naturally pleased with the financial successes of the co-ops, but for him financial viability was only part of the movement's significance. In his own words, "running a cheap store [was] not a great social aim; it [had] little social significance."⁸⁰ But as "a social enterprise" contributing to justice and a better world, the cheap co-op store had a special place. Co-ops reaffirmed the spirit of community and nurtured an appreciation for neighbours both far and near. For Siemens, the long-term consequences were clear:

people working together in large groups for their mutual welfare, putting into practice the good principles of self-help, opposing exploitation in any sense cannot do other than have a beneficent effect on our society.⁸¹

Not everyone in the West Reserve area applauded the co-operatives or endorsed RAS policies. Some groups opposed them simply because they were new and unfamiliar. Merchants felt the co-ops presented a real danger to their own livelihood. Others reacted unfavourably to the socialist character of the co-ops and attempted to connect the movement with international communism. Labels of

"Red" were hurled at co-operators who were accused of transforming southern Manitoba into a "colony of Moscow."⁸² Similar epithets were directed against Siemens, who was also variously denounced as a godless heretic and a foe of Christianity. Opposition to the co-ops came also from the Mennonite church leaders.

Much of the opposition undoubtedly arose from the further reduction of the church's sphere of influence. Historically, the introduction of municipal government, the disintegration of the villages, the opening up and ending of the reserves, the coming of the public school, and the intrusion of secular institutions generally had been hard to accept. Now the co-op movement represented further erosion of the place of the institutional church.

The leaders of the movement did not see themselves opposing the church. On the contrary, they believed themselves to be returning to some of the traditions of the community and mutual aid. They had no desire to usurp the church's authority or mission. They did not preach subversion, nor did they urge the overthrow of the existing political and religious order. They attempted to accommodate all persons within the ranks, regardless of their religious and political orientations, and advocated closer co-operation between individuals and groups for the benefit of them all.

On account of his high public profile and his image as a "man of the world," Siemens absorbed the brunt of the church's reaction. He was at home with the literary works of Shakespeare and Shaw, and he moved easily among people of high finance and industry. He read and recommended to others books written by religious liberals and socialists, and he crusaded on behalf of a new economic order. Siemens persevered in spite of the church's obstructions, though he was deeply scarred by the character assaults and insinuations directed his way.⁸³ Lesser men might have acquiesced to the dissenting pressure or have left the community. Not so Siemens. He maintained faith in his cause and his actions. Though he finally departed from the Bergthaler Church, he refused to forsake the people who had worked so tirelessly alongside him. His trust in the basic goodness of mankind preserved itself and was rewarded by the general, though gradual, acceptance of the RAS and the co-ops. Siemens confided that the satisfaction expressed to him by so many people compensated for the hurts administered by the movement's detractors. He took pride in the fact that the co-op success had not been achieved at public

expense yet had returned to the community substantial economic and social dividends. After visiting communities across Canada, sociologist Fretz concluded:

It is doubtful if any other community in the United States or Canada, whether Mennonite or non-Mennonite, has developed such a vigorous and thorough-going program of co-operatives as has Altona, Manitoba. There are many examples, but none of them have developed so many successful ventures in so short a time; and no other community is contemplating such far-reaching and permanent economic changes in the direction of co-operatives in the future.⁸⁴

The Russlaender in the Winnipeg area also felt the need for co-operative endeavours in agriculture, but being more scattered in their communities, they met with less success. An initiating group of 19 persons from six communities in the Winnipeg area met on November 8, 1933, at Glenlea to discuss the formation of a Mennonite Agricultural Association, whose chief function would be to help Mennonites market their produce and also to purchase supplies co-operatively in order to keep in Mennonite hands those profits normally going to middlemen. While such an organization would have to begin working on a small scale, it should eventually attend to all agricultural needs, including such divergent directions as settlement and land purchases and representing Mennonite interests before the agricultural corporations. Something had to be done, it was felt, to compensate for the absence of a *geschlossene Ansiedlung* (closed settlement) and to help overcome the depression.⁸⁵ The Association, however, did not come into being because it lacked the driving force and leadership essential to its success.

Individualism and Secularization

The co-op movement had a much reduced appeal in the East Reserve area, although a co-op cheese factory operated successfully at Grunthal. During the depression, the agricultural advantages of that region, which had been in doubt since the earliest days of settlement, became obvious. Here mixed farming, having always been the rule, was now deeply entrenched and proving itself as the best means of "weathering the storm" of the depression. As the East Reserve

enjoyed "a period of prosperity such as it had never experienced before" the population density rose, the number of farms increased, and farm income and farm value were significantly advanced. Even the smallest of farms, specializing in products such as poultry, potatoes, or berries,

enabled many resourceful Mennonites to make a good living on notoriously poor soil by utilizing the supply of relatively cheap and efficient labour as well as the closeness to the Winnipeg market.⁸⁶

The continuity during the depression of an agricultural tradition, already well established and whose time had now come, made the East Reserve area less in need of, and less susceptible to, reform movements and innovation. Consequently, the co-operative movement held less appeal.⁸⁷ The stronger individualism resulting from the much earlier break-up of the village system and its reinforcement by evangelical movements emphasizing individual salvation rather than communal responsibility led to an aggressive venture into capitalist enterprise, not least of all in the automobile trade.

Ironically, the automobile became king in that very locale where more than a generation earlier the first entrepreneurs had been excommunicated by the church because of their reaching for the car. Thus, reaction to the impossible demands by church leaders in an earlier day may have shaped, as much as any factor, the economic philosophy of the East Reserve's central trading centre.⁸⁸ The town of Steinbach in the northeast corner of the reserve, for instance, prospered more than most French or Ukrainian villages in the region, though Steinbach lacked what all others considered essential, namely a railway connection. A small but "significant commercial empire" was building up, based on "competitive enterprise and individual resourcefulness rather than on co-operative effort."⁸⁹ Steinbach boasted numerous industries already in the 1920s:

a 100 bbl. flour mill, six stores, three large garages, blacksmith and tinsmith shops, a butcher business and cold storage plant, a creamery receiving station and pasteurizing plant, a cheese factory, two lumber yards and two sash and door factories, two implement businesses and two shoemakers, two barber shops, a watchmaker, a machine shop for repairing any-

thing from a set of harrows to a steam engine, a good restaurant—one of the best little hotels in the country, a doctor, a printing office and paper, and an electric light plant.⁹⁰

Emphasizing individual initiative in the extreme, East Reserve people were “openly boasting” that they could get along without “economic crutches” like co-ops.⁹¹ After all, it was individual farmers who had shaped East Reserve agriculture when the village system had proved unfeasible, and it was the “inventive genius,” the “progressive” outlook, and the “top salesmanship” of its businessmen that “blazed the trail of progress.”⁹² Relief was the very last resort for people in economic distress. The unemployed were given an axe and a pick and told by the municipality to “earn your warm meal a day” and thus learn that there was more to life than loafing, grumbling, and developing inferiority complexes.⁹³ As Francis has observed:

Thrown without much mercy upon their own resourcefulness, they discovered many opportunities for rehabilitation, either by developing mechanical hobbies into gainful occupations . . . or by cultivating small plots obtained on easy terms and netting satisfactory profits from small garden crops, such as berries and vegetables.⁹⁴

Whereas in the West Reserve area economic stimulus and educational direction came from the co-operative movement and the Rhineland Agricultural Society, in the East it was the Board of Trade, later known as the Chamber of Commerce, which “caught on strongly in the 1930s” and which sponsored short courses “on everything from bee-keeping to hog-raising” and which organized clubs and introduced high-grade livestock and poultry into the area.⁹⁵

The East, however, was not entirely free from economic woes. One event, described by A.A. Friesen as “the greatest hoax or swindle in Mennonite history,”⁹⁶ was coincident with the depression, if not a consequence of it, and threw a dark shadow over the East Reserve area. That event was the 1934 foreclosure action against the Intercontinental Land Company by National Trust, one of the major holders of first (Class A) mortgage bonds, which financed the purchase in the 1920s by 300 Russlaender families of 40,000 acres of

improved and equipped lands, sold to Intercontinental by the emigrating Kanadier.⁹⁷ In addition to the Class A landholders, there were 969 B-bonds, purchased for \$113,000.⁹⁸

The holders of these second mortgage bonds, earning seven per cent, were Mennonites and Amish in the U.S.A. and Ontario, whose involvement in this business venture came largely through the salesmanship of Alvin J. Miller, the former director of Mennonite relief in Russia, who was equipped with signed endorsements of the financial scheme from David Toews of the Board and also with the support of M.H. Kratz, a Mennonite lawyer from Philadelphia.

In the foreclosure action by National Trust—which could not be stopped, only delayed by the Board⁹⁹—these B-bond holders were the losers, and the repercussions thereof were felt by the Board for years to come, for that is where the complaints were directed by those who once had given their trust. There were complaints such as the following, all of them in vain:

My husband . . . died. Am left a widow . . . with \$1100 debt at . . . bank. . . . Help me along by [getting me the] interest on the thousand dollars loaned to your people.¹⁰⁰

Before leaving the subject of the economy of southern Manitoba, it must be noted that the depression marked the end of several of the community institutions transplanted from Russia to the reserves of Manitoba, by which the church had served—and controlled—much of the Mennonite society. These institutions were the *Waisenamt* in the West Reserve area and the *Brandschulze* (fire insurance).

The *Waisenamt* had originated in Prussia as a church institution established for the purpose of managing the property of orphans and widows. In time, its function as a financial institution had broadened to become a “bank,” which received deposits for purposes of saving. Money was also loaned to alleviate economic need and to assist in the acquisition of farms. In the emigration of the 1870s, the *Waisenamt* not only facilitated the emigration of orphans and widows, the liquidation of their properties in Russia, and the transfer of their assets to a new country, but also rendered the same essential service for all the emigrants.¹⁰¹

Once the function of the *Waisenamt* had been expanded from its primary role as the protector of orphans and widows to a savings bank

and multi-purpose financial institution, there was no easy backtracking. And it served well, at least for a while. The *Waisenamt* observed the established norms of "efficiency, honesty, and charity," and "debtors, creditors, and church officials co-operated in order to do justice to everybody concerned."¹⁰² As one outside observer has written:

. . . the letter of a contract was always interpreted in the spirit of Christian justice and charity. . . . the creditor . . . was morally bound to consider the welfare of a tardy debtor . . . to advise and to guide him in the management of his farm until he was able to repay his debts. . . . among the Manitoba Mennonites [there were no known] Shylocks and usurious money lenders. . . .¹⁰³

In due course, however, the *Waisenamt* administrator in the West Reserve area, as well as government officials, had become uneasy about the fact that the institution was not incorporated under Canadian trust company laws. Contrary to the wishes of many church members, this incorporation had been pursued by the administrator and achieved early in 1907 with the result that the *Waisenamt* was split into two parts, one incorporated and operated by the Bergthaler church and the other unincorporated and operated by the Sommerfelder church.¹⁰⁴

The incorporated Bergthaler *Waisenamt* was still under Bergthaler church control, but there was no provision limiting the business to Bergthaler members. On the contrary, the bylaws were rewritten to allow non-members (Sommerfelder, Altkolonier, Brethren, and others) to invest and vote but not to hold office. This was an ominous turn of events, as H. J. Gerbrandt has written:

Although no one surmised the dark clouds that were already forming beyond the visible horizon, this move had negative implications. It barred from responsible office heavy capital investors who later caused so much grief.¹⁰⁵

The activity of the Bergthaler *Waisenamt* increased markedly after incorporation. Soon the deposits exceeded one million dollars. And most of these monies were loaned and outstanding, lesser amounts against cosigned notes and greater amounts against mortgage notes.

The *Waisenamt* was continuing to operate in the new situation as it had always done, on the narrow interest margin of one per cent and with no reserves. As long as the withdrawals were few and small, the *Waisenamt* was safe. But withdrawals were bound to come. The emigration of the 1920s and the resulting withdrawals created a temporary emergency and represented forewarnings of what was to come. When the Wall Street stock market collapsed, depositors in the Mennonite *Waisenamt* panicked and began to withdraw their assets. The church, having authorized its elder to sign bank and mortgage company loans, signed its properties over to the *Waisenamt* as security against borrowings to make the withdrawals possible.

The assumption was that if only the people would be patient, the crisis would pass as new investors would replenish the treasury. Before this did or could happen, however, a non-Bergthaler depositor, unable to withdraw in 1931 his investment of nearly \$20,000, filed suit. The courts issued an injunction naming Monarch Life Association as the executor and that was the end of the Bergthaler *Waisenamt*. A request two years later by the person filing suit that the Bergthaler *Waisenamt* be restored and not liquidated came too late. As the church's official historian has noted:

There was nothing left to go back to . . . [and] the placing as collateral the deposits of widows and orphans to secure the monies of the rich investors and their losing everything, still casts a bad shadow over the testimony of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church.¹⁰⁶

The Bergthaler *Waisenamt* experience was not unique. Other financial institutions also collapsed at that time. Even so, Gerbrandt notes that while "greater sincerity" and goodwill could not have saved the *Waisenamt*, more financial and business expertise "beyond the limited Mennonite world" and a "healthy reserve of soundly-invested or frozen assets might have saved the institution."¹⁰⁷

The Sommerfelder church continued to operate its unincorporated *Waisenamt*, according to its constitution.¹⁰⁸ In due course the Sommerfelder began to sense, as the Bergthaler had 15 years earlier, that incorporation was desirable, if not absolutely necessary, in view of the large amounts of money on deposit and on loan. Shortly after incorporation, amendments in the relevant statute gave the

Waisenamt the right "to receive money on deposit" and "to loan money on real, personal, and mixed securities."¹⁰⁹ By the mid 1920s, the investments totalled nearly \$1,200,000.¹¹⁰

This "bank" was maintained until investor-panic early in the 1930s landed the Sommerfelder *Waisenamt* in the same predicament as that of the Bergthaler. Funds were withdrawn, yet loans could not be repaid as prices for farm products fell and land values themselves plummeted. Various measures were undertaken to prevent foreclosure, such as the sale of lands in lieu of bad debts, a two-dollar levy payable by every church member, reduction of the administrators' salaries, crediting every dollar of debt repaid with \$1.25, and no interest on deposits for four years.¹¹¹

The measures brought only short-term relief. A 1935 lawsuit against the *Waisenamt* revealed that the institution was insolvent, and, at the request of the *Waisenamt*, the Manitoba government appointed a permanent liquidator. The winding up of the Sommerfelder *Waisenamt* was more successful than the Bergthaler one, and in the end, creditors received a 50.5 per cent return on their money.¹¹² The records were burned thereafter,¹¹³ but the judgement of history, recorded by Jake Peters, could not easily be avoided:

When the *Waisenamt* changed its task from the protection of widows and orphans (regarded as a sacred duty) to being a co-operative bank (based on the laws of economics) it deserted those who needed the *Waisenamt* most, just before the depression when it would need them most.¹¹⁴

The judgements rendered after the closings could have been too harsh. After all, the money that was lost had been loaned to the most needy people. In fact, the problem was that more had been loaned to the needy than the *Waisenamt* could afford, given the fact that unlike the banks the *Waisenamt* had no double-indemnity banking and at least one purpose of incorporation had been to attract more investments precisely to enable a greater service. Thus, it is possible that the needy gained most from *Waisenamt* closings and that the less needy lost the most. That possibility, of course, does not remove the pain resulting from the loss of an historic and semi-sacred institution.

The *Waisenaemter* did not all collapse. There were several small ones in Saskatchewan, and others existed in Manitoba among the Old

Colony people and the Chortitzer.¹¹⁵ The latter group made efforts in 1933 to strengthen its *Waisenamt* by updating and publicizing widely the provisions thereof.¹¹⁶ The rules specified election of the administrator every four years with ratification by the church leaders. The rules of the *Waisenamt* provided for the proper care of orphans until the age of 21 and the just administration and ultimate distribution of any properties under the supervision and administration of the guardian or trustee, who himself had to answer to the *Waisenamt* and the leadership of the church.

Another traditional church-related mutual aid organization, which ended up as an incorporated commercial insurance company at the end of the 1930s, was *Die Mennonitische Brandtordnung* (Mennonite fire insurance). Founded in 1875 and based on Prussian and Russian precedents, the *Ordnung* became in 1940 the Red River Mennonite Mutual Insurance Company. Thus, an organization based on mutual aid and responsibility for one's brothers, symbolizing Mennonite separation from the world in its refusal to insure and rescue from fire such places as theatres and dance halls, became a business, allowing non-Mennonite membership, and determined, indeed obligated, to turn a profit.¹¹⁷

Resistance to Secularized Aid

While the "secularization" of Mennonite mutual aid organizations was proceeding among the Kanadier in western Canada, concerted efforts were made by the Swiss in eastern Canada to prevent or reverse that very process. The focus was the Mennonite Aid Union. The Union had come into being in 1866 with the approval of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario, which Conference reaffirmed its authority over it in 1932, precisely because membership and aid policies were in danger of becoming too broad.¹¹⁸ As the Conference's historian noted:

There has been a tendency on the part of some sons and sons-in-law, who are not members of the church to abuse their privilege and to consider the Union as a cheap insurance company.¹¹⁹

The original impetus for the organization was the desire for "a plan . . . which would be helpful in guiding the person in the amount

which he should reasonably give in case of a brother suffering loss by fire."¹²⁰ The practice of mutual aid in "the household of faith" and among "all men" had been one of the "outstanding" characteristics of the Mennonite churches since their founding. Assistance was rendered without a "system to guide" those giving assistance "but each one followed his own conviction and judgement."¹²¹

This completely voluntary and rather informal method of recompense had become inadequate, in terms of both the methods employed and the amounts raised. As a consequence, there was a considerable temptation on the part of the brethren to insure their properties with commercial organizations, which were becoming a strong economic force, particularly in the Waterloo County area.¹²² The Amish were sensing the same pressures, as is evident from the formation of their own Fire and Storm Aid Union at that time.¹²³ Their organization also required updating in the 1930s.¹²⁴

In 1933, the Mennonite Aid Union of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario had about 1,350 members, whose total "risk" carried by the Union amounted to \$7,500,000.¹²⁵ The affairs of the Union were managed on the basis of rules set forth in 27 bylaws. Administrative responsibility rested with an Executive Committee appointed by the Board of Directors. The Executive consisted of 30 church members from each church district in the Ontario and Alberta-Saskatchewan conferences.¹²⁶ The Executive set the annual levies on the basis of the losses for the previous year, and the directors collected the levies in their districts. Losses were paid at no more than two-thirds of actual cash value, and single risks on any one building were limited to \$6,000 and an entire risk to \$16,000, except if the Executive Committee ruled otherwise in particular cases.

All that was needed to become a member of the Union was a signature—later, church membership in good standing had to be certified—but continuous membership required at least every five years an outside valuation of the member's property, the prompt payment by January 1 of all rates levied, observance of all precautions against fire, and avoidance of insurance in both the Union and an insurance company without the consent of the Union's executive. Members "fully insured" in the Union lost their membership immediately if and when they applied for insurance in another company.¹²⁷

The problems facing the Union were several. Regulations and administrative procedures needed updating to match the changing

business affairs of the brethren, but even more important was the need to prevent the Union from becoming not the deliberate instrument of a Christian community to maintain brotherhood but the best way to get the cheapest insurance. The Conference, therefore, resolved that it could no longer admit "sons and sons-in-law of Mennonite church members, who themselves were not members, because this permitted undesirable characters" to "consider the Union as a cheap insurance company"¹²⁸ and to share the benefits of the Union.¹²⁹ Before the decade was over, the constitution of the Union was revised to require that all new applications for membership be accompanied by a signed certificate of good standing in the church.¹³⁰

In other ways, however, the Union could not avoid adjusting to the demands of the times. At a special meeting of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario on June 20, 1935, a charter as a regular fire insurance company was approved for the Mennonite Aid Union upon the advice of the Inspector of Insurance for Ontario, who had ruled that a charter be secured unless the business was limited to members of the church. The latter had already become the policy of the Union, but even these members insisted on a charter because without it they could not obtain government loans for their farm operations. Such loans required fire insurance in a chartered company.¹³¹

The Mennonite Aid Union could not, however, be a comprehensive aid plan for the Mennonite congregation. To begin with, the purposes of the Aid were quite limited, even though losses caused by lightning, wind, and water were in due course added to those caused by fire.¹³² Additionally, coverage was not universal in terms of membership. Some still looked upon the Union with suspicion and distrust or even as a "money-making scheme."¹³³ For these and other reasons, older forms of mutual aid continued to exist. Among the Old Order Mennonites the voluntary system was still the only way of responding to farm or family disasters. All that was needed for a barn to be rebuilt or a hospital bill to be paid was for the brethren to be informed of the need and the necessary manpower or funds would be donated.

The new problems of the 1930s, namely financial failings, including business and farm bankruptcies, were a strong reminder of the earlier tradition in which the brethren helped each other to carry

their burdens, whatever they might be, in whatever way that seemed right and possible at the time. Such sharing required openness and frankness on the part of the brethren, which was unavoidable when very visible disasters caused by fire and storm struck or when the closeness of a community really made the hiding of even less visible troubles impossible. But the communities were no longer limited to intimate agricultural neighbourhoods, and financial problems had become much less visible. Noting all of these developments, the Conference tried in 1934 to restore, in the context of the depression and the new situation, this earlier sense of mutuality when it resolved as follows:

Because of present-day economic conditions, resulting in many financial failures among our membership, be it resolved that we encourage our Bishops, Pastors, and Deacons to teach, to encourage and to caution our members in regard to all financial dealings, and to be perfectly open and frank with regard to inability to meet financial obligations. Romans 13:8, Luke 6:31, Romans 12:7.¹³⁴

There is no specific data available concerning the number of failures, but the *Gospel Herald* noted editorially in 1935 that “hundreds of Mennonites” a few years ago “in easy circumstances” were “now either bankrupt or facing bankruptcy.” Since these had been among “the most substantial givers,” church activities were crippled for want of adequate financial support.¹³⁵

In Ontario most of the “failings” had to do with “overextended farm operations,” which, lacking adequate markets and income, could no longer maintain the debt burden.¹³⁶ Every congregation had “at least one or two or three” such cases, which resulted in “assignment sales.” In such sales everything would be sold, and creditors would get “so many cents” on the dollar. Mennonites tried to avoid the courts, and this often meant that they were taken advantage of and “left holding the bag.” Settlements made on an informal basis often involved “a referee” acceptable to both parties.¹³⁷ The inevitable consequence was the loss of farms, and the former “owners” working as hired hands or taking on factory jobs. Another consequence was a virtual end to the cordiality in economic relations that had formerly existed both among Mennonites and with their neighbours.

Business operations too were more and more carried on apart from the awareness of the brotherhood. The traditional fear of the business world was on the decline, even though the wish was "still generally expressed that we might continue a strictly rural people." A leading defender of business in the Old Mennonite church was Orie Miller, the young layman from Pennsylvania, who had entered Russia to help relieve famine in 1920. Acknowledging all the "pitfalls and temptations" and "the evils of the system"—such as ruthless competition, exploitation of human beings, and profit as the single standard of success—he noted that "individual Christians in the business world to-day are living witnesses" of what can be done "in mitigating the evils of the system" and in "using business and its rewards in positive service."¹³⁸ Thus, the church was not judgmental as once it had been but rather empathetic, though little could be done in concrete ways to help the businessmen in distress, except as poverty cases.

The provision for, and insurance of, human beings and their needs took on new meaning in the 1930s. The problems of the poor, the sick, and those who wanted to provide for their loved ones in the event of death or disability all came to the fore in a new way. Discussions in all of these matters were initiated by the Mennonite Conference of Ontario in 1932. At that time, the Conference was concerned about the "persistent inroads" into the church by secret societies and insurance companies who were offering systematic ways of providing "so that the needy may never be left in suspense and anxiety."¹³⁹ The end result of these discussions was the creation first of the Mennonite Welfare Board and later of the Mennonite Benefit Association.

The Mennonite Welfare Board of Ontario was organized in 1939 in order to centralize, under the deacon body of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario, the various charitable funds collected to help the poor so that they could be administered more equitably.¹⁴⁰ These funds were five in number and included the Conference Poor Fund, the Ministers' Aid Fund, the Waterloo County Deacons' Poor Fund, the Waterloo Township Poor and Church Building Fund, and the Emma McNally Estate Fund, all of which had arisen historically in response to specific needs. Besides planning for the care of senior citizens in a special home, the Board responded to the needs of those ministers and members presented for consideration by the congregational deacon.¹⁴¹

With regard to life insurance, the Conference asked Bishop Oscar Burkholder to make a study and to write clarifying articles concerning his findings.¹⁴² After talking extensively to representatives of life insurance companies and reviewing the traditions and teachings of the church, Burkholder came to the conclusion that there were many “scriptural objections to life insurance,” including: the care of the poor being the duty of the church; the immense holdings and extraordinary salaries found in insurance companies; discrimination against the poor and diseased; money, income, and wealth as standards of value and worth; the negative reflections on man’s ability to manage his money and take care of his family, on God and his promises, and on charity as a Christian practice; the supplanting of faith and trust with cold reason and unsympathetic facts; and the unequal yoking of believers and unbelievers.¹⁴³

Life insurance people, Burkholder said, belittled the work of the church, discouraged large families (“you can’t expect a father and a mother who breed like rabbits to be entitled to insurance privileges”), paid back to policyholders only half of what they received and built skyscrapers and luxurious offices with the rest. He minced no words in assessing the role of the companies:

... life insurance has become a huge octopus, draining the resources of millions of people, making them believe there is no material safety anywhere else, no possibilities of getting ahead in this life, but a gradual sinking into insignificance and despair for everyone who is not insured. Then rising to wonderful heights of sentiment and sympathy, their eloquence dripping with honeyed words of religion and human love they pose as the greatest benefactors the world has ever seen.¹⁴⁴

As an alternative he suggested a permanent church fund, supported systematically and proportionately by every church member. He also encouraged the purchase of government annuities, rather than insurance company annuities, since the government was engaged in public service, while “the insurance companies conduct their business for profit.”¹⁴⁵

The Conference’s position on life insurance — it was believed to be contrary to the principles of the church — meant that related schemes of protecting the present and providing for the future had also to be examined.¹⁴⁶ The result of such a special investigation led to the conclusion that “all questionable schemes of investment” should be

avoided, but that government annuities were acceptable, as were mothers' allowances and old age pensions. None the less, needy widows and senior citizens were encouraged not to apply for government assistance before discussing their needs with deacons and ministers of the home congregation. If the congregation was unable to meet the need, the deacon should take it to the conference-wide welfare board before allowing the matter to come before government agencies.¹⁴⁷

In the insurance field, a most vexing problem turned out to be that of liability insurance for car owners and drivers.¹⁴⁸ After wrestling with the issue for more than a decade, 1927–1940, the two conference executives from the Old Mennonites and the Amish Mennonites, and the respective aid union committees, came to the conclusion that such a plan was unavoidable in the context of the brotherhood.¹⁴⁹ The first stage of discussion dealt with its need and acceptability. The need was rather obvious and arose from “the present conditions of automobile traffic and risk, and the liabilities consequent upon these conditions.”¹⁵⁰ The acceptability became clear when the special automobile liability committee placed auto insurance “in the same class of protection as that of the Aid Union in view of the fact that accidents occurred daily beyond the control of the operator.”¹⁵¹ But no sooner had a car aid plan become acceptable when it was found to be unfeasible, because the government regulations required a charter and starting capital and because the committee concluded that there were not enough church members and owners of cars who were sufficiently interested to make the plan workable in view of the fact that the rates would be higher than those of commercial companies.¹⁵² It was much easier for Mennonites to accept church aid plans when they were cheaper than commercial plans.

Medical and Other Institutions

Further evidence of organized—and, after Burkholder, predictable—mutual aid activity was supplied by the creation in Ontario of the Mennonite Mutual Benefit Association “as the agency through which her membership will be provided with a systematic method of sharing, in a Christian way, the financial burdens of sickness, disability and death.”¹⁵³ The fees were \$10 per person between the

ages of 18 and 65, plus an annual assessment. The benefits included hospitalization at \$4 per day up to \$120, surgery to a maximum of \$150, disability of \$3 per day to a maximum of \$150, and a maximum death benefit of \$500 reduced at the rate of \$15 per year after the age of 35.¹⁵⁴

In western Canada, the matter of medical and hospital insurance was accompanied by the actual hiring of doctors and/or the establishment of hospitals during the 1930s. In southern Manitoba, town churches and community leaders co-operated in the founding of hospital societies and the opening of hospitals, in 1930 in Steinbach, where they supplemented a care home for invalids,¹⁵⁵ and in 1936 in Altona and Winkler. Medical and hospital care was provided on the basis of family contracts costing about \$18 per year.¹⁵⁶

The Mennonite Hospital Concordia in Winnipeg came into being as a full-fledged hospital in 1930, following the organization of Society Concordia with 30 members from both the Conference and Brethren people.¹⁵⁷ The new institution, however, was preceded a few years by a maternity home established by alumni of the Halbstadt Commercial School, among them N.J. Neufeld, a medical doctor who had completed specialization in surgery in Austria and Germany and who had obtained Manitoba certification as a qualified doctor in 1926. Without him and, quite possibly, the support of a Kanadier doctor, Gerhard Hiebert, whom we have previously met as the president of the Mennonite Immigration Aid, Concordia would not have advanced as rapidly.¹⁵⁸ In the first eleven months of its operation, the hospital admitted 297 patients, of whom 113 were maternity patients, 114 surgical, 67 medical, and 3 with fractured bones.¹⁵⁹

The incorporation of the Society under an act of the Manitoba legislature was followed by aggressive promotion to increase membership to 200 or more and by fund-raising in order to expand the facilities. The latter effort included the raffle of a \$600 1931 Ford Tudor Sedan with net proceeds of \$472.50 and a tour of U.S.A. churches by a delegation of the Society.¹⁶⁰ In 1934, the Society purchased for \$21,250 the 40-year old Winnipeg Sanitarium. What was needed in addition to space, however, was the enabling of patients, as well as the hospital, to afford the required care, in other words a medical insurance plan.

A contract system was introduced whereby groups of insured

families, ten or more, were formed and a designated person was appointed to collect from each family a \$12 annual levy, first to pay only for hospitalization but later, with a slight increase in fees, to cover medical costs as well. The contract system had wide appeal, and within a year about 400 families were signed up through 25 contracts. Revised from time to time, the system was in force until a generation later when a compulsory government hospital insurance plan replaced it, and, in the process, what had been the heart of the institution, namely the close involvement of the people on behalf of each other.

At Coaldale also a hospital was founded in 1934, preceded for several years by a medical plan and the services of a doctor through a newly formed health society.¹⁶¹ The cost of medical care in the new country had shocked the immigrants into action. One immigrant girl, working as a domestic in Lethbridge for \$20 a month, had been billed \$40 for throat surgery and \$20 for a week of hospital care, in other words a total of three months of salary for one week of medical care. One family, still living in a railroad car, fearing the cost, had declined to call a doctor to assist in the birth of a child, only to discover when the infant died 11 days later that a doctor had to certify the death—at a cost of ten dollars.

This reluctance to seek even urgent medical help led to the founding of the first immigrant medical group, namely the Coaldale Mennonite Health Society, which collected one dollar per family per month and acquired the free services, including surgery, of a Lethbridge doctor. The delivery of a child cost an extra \$15. Membership grew rapidly from an initial 25 families to over 300. A further monthly fee of one dollar per family also guaranteed free hospital care by 1932. Soon the society was recruiting a German-speaking Mennonite doctor (1933) and establishing its own 12-bed hospital (1934).¹⁶²

Following the Coaldale pattern, Mennonites in British Columbia organized the Bethesda Mennonite Health Society with over 100 families and individuals—members—agreeing to pay up to 10 dollars a year. The Society paid the doctor \$85 a month, plus surgical fees of \$27 for appendectomies and \$50 for major operations.¹⁶³

Burial aid societies of one form or another sprang up in almost every community, and these usually bridged the various church groups. At Whitewater, for example, a Burial Fund Society was

founded in 1933 for both Conference and Brethren churches. The fees were 10 cents annually per person, and 10 dollars' support was paid in the case of a death.¹⁶⁴

The depression would have been even more problematic for the Mennonite community had there been many other church institutions to finance, but such was not the case. In the local congregations there were no ministers to be salaried. The conferences placed no "levies" on the congregations, for their overhead was small and very few programs were mandatory. The fees that Mennonites were expected to pay were based on local covenants having to do with mutual aid societies. Besides that, the Russlaender faced some universal levies, including a five-cent-a-month-per-immigrant fee for the care of mental patients to prevent their deportation¹⁶⁵ and a 50-cent annual fee payable to the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization for the financing of its operations.¹⁶⁶

The schools, of course, depended for their capital and operating needs on the constituency, but such educational institutions were few in number. On the prairies the church elementary schools had disappeared, and in Ontario they had not yet appeared. The Bible schools, basically on a winter schedule, were low-budget institutions, and the more costly Bible colleges of a later day had not yet been founded. Only the Gretna and Rosthern high schools, founded to help prepare teachers, were two institutions which really felt the depression, as can be illustrated from the life of the German-English Academy in Rosthern.¹⁶⁷

The Academy had had a difficult financial struggle since it first opened its doors in 1905. Perennially in debt, there were years when the school's credit was stretched to such a limit that even the meagre teachers' salaries could not be paid. The year 1931 was another one like that, and when C.D. Penner, the principal, left to continue his university studies, with \$455 or nearly one-third of his salary unpaid, he had to wait the better part of the 1930s until the institution's obligations to him were finally met.

The person chiefly responsible for the financial well-being of the Academy was its board chairman, David Toews, who at the same time was trying to liquidate an immense immigration debt. At the Academy, expenses were cut to the barest minimum, including several reductions of teachers' salaries, and every possible way of increasing revenue and resources was pursued, most of these yielding

only small amounts, so that the whole effort became known as *Kleinarbeit* (the small effort). As it is written elsewhere:

At Hochfeld near Hague the *Kleinarbeit* consisted of paying a few cents from each bushel of wheat harvested. In Saskatoon the working girls agreed to put away 15 cents a month for the school and thereby they contributed \$75 in one year. Another example of *Kleinarbeit* was the printing of membership cards and selling them for 25 cents each.¹⁶⁸

Students and teachers were sent out to raise funds. Greater pressure was brought to bear on student accounts in arrears. Donations were sought from well-to-do Mennonites in the U.S.A., with only marginal success. The German consulate provided books for the library and book grants. Youth programs were prepared and sold. In such ways "a dollar at a time the Academy was kept alive."¹⁶⁹ At the end of the 1937-38 school year all operating debts, including teachers' salaries, had been paid, and the treasury had \$6.60 in it. The capital debt had been reduced to \$12,500.¹⁷⁰

One of the most vexing problems in the 1930s was the collection among the Russlaender of the outstanding *Reiseschuld* of the 1920s. At the beginning of 1931 this transportation debt, including principal and interest accumulated at six per cent, amounted to \$1,040,727, more than half of the total credits advanced by then by the CPR, namely \$1,924,727 on behalf of 13,354 of 20,201 immigrants who had been unable to pay their own way.¹⁷¹

This debt was an ominous burden, and when collections in 1930 amounted to less than the interest for the year, Board officials knew that they had a serious problem on their hands. That problem was due not only to the shortage of cash but also to the lack of willingness to pay.¹⁷² The notion, widespread among the newcomers, that the CPR was profiting from the immigrants even without the payment of the *Reiseschuld* was supported in part by Col. J.S. Dennis's own arguments, previously cited (Chapter 5), and by the repeated willingness of the railway in the 1920s to overlook the legalities of the contracts and in the 1930s and 1940s to cancel several huge chunks of interest or debt, an amount eventually totalling more than one million dollars.¹⁷³

Still the principal had to be collected, and for this purpose a full-

time collector was put on the road, namely C.F. Klassen, who worked with the provincial immigrant committees and district representatives. Whatever the attitude of individual immigrants themselves, the leaders and all the officials of the Board considered the debt a holy obligation. Their influence was felt as congregations and conferences themselves emphasized the moral dimensions of the problem and called for disciplinary action against those able but unwilling to pay. For, and on behalf of, those unable to pay on account of death, sickness, depression, or other misfortune, the concepts of a general obligation, of solidarity and togetherness, came into play, meaning that in the end all immigrants were responsible for outstanding immigrant debts.¹⁷⁴

Even so, when the 1930s drew to a close, a debt approaching three-quarters of a million dollars remained. There was no suggestion that the transportation debt be referred to the debt adjustment tribunals, created by special legislation in the 1930s to help people avoid declaring bankruptcy. Many Mennonites availed themselves of the provisions of the legislation to reduce their settlement debts, but adjustment of the transportation debt was not attempted. Why not isn't clear because the courts, in all probability, would have been more generous than the CPR.¹⁷⁵ Nearly another decade, further concessions from the CPR, a more prosperous wartime economy, and the motivation to help more Mennonite refugees, of which there would be tens of thousands, would be required before the collective debt would finally be retired.¹⁷⁶

The *Reiseschuld* and other problems of the 1930s revealed that Mennonite solidarity and togetherness were really quite limited. Co-operatives, burial societies, medical associations, and mutual aid organizations were for the most part circumscribed by the local communities in which they existed. There wasn't a single problem or program which all the Mennonites in Canada, perhaps not even in a given province, were working at all together. Every universe of Mennonite activity was smaller than appeared desirable. David Toews, at least, was quite convinced that the Mennonite organizational structures were quite inadequate to meet the total needs of the Canadian community. This prompted an ambitious reorganization of inter-Mennonite structures, for which, however, the times also were not propitious.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 L.J. Burkholder, *A Brief History of the Mennonites in Ontario* (Markham, Ont.: Mennonite Conference of Ontario, 1935), p. 156.
- 2 CGC, XV-31.2, "1940-J.J. Siemens," "Education in the Ideals of Cooperation," n.d.
- 3 A.E. Safarian, *The Canadian Economy in the Great Depression* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), p. 1.
- 4 James H. Gray, *The Winter Years: The Depression on the Prairies* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1966), and L.M. Grayson and Michael Bliss, eds., *The Wretched of Canada: Letters to R.B. Bennett, 1930-1935* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).
- 5 A.E. Safarian, p. 40.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 194-96.
- 8 Walter Sawatsky, "History of the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference" (research paper, Goshen College, 1967), p. 11.
- 9 H.T. Klaassen, *The Birth and Growth of the Eigenheim Mennonite Church, 1892-1974* (n.p., 1974), p. 48. The 19-cent price for wheat was undoubtedly the price received by the farmer. Compare S.M. Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), p. 90.
- 10 H.T. Klaassen, p. 54.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 12 Blair Neathy, "The Saskatchewan Relief Commission, 1931-34," in *Historical Essays on the Prairie Provinces*, ed. Donald Swainson (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), pp. 274-82.
- 13 Ernest A. Jeschke, *Memoirs* (Goshen, Ind.: Marlin Jeschke, 1966), p. 171.
- 14 See Alma Lawton, "Urban Relief in Saskatchewan in the Depression" (M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1970); Don Garfield Matheson, "The Saskatchewan Relief Commission, 1931-1934: A Study of the Administration of Rural Relief in Saskatchewan during the Early Years of the Depression" (M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1975).
- 15 John Kendle, *John Bracken: A Political Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979).
- 16 John A. Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959).
- 17 Neil McKenty, "That Tory Hepburn," in *Profiles of a Province: Studies in the History of Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1967):137-41; *idem*, *Mitch Hepburn* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

- 18 Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1958).
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 276.
- 20 CMCA, XXII-A-1, David Toews to Town of Herbert, 10 November 1933.
- 21 David Toews, "Something About Our Relief Work," *The Mennonite* 54 (7 February 1939):3. See also "Clothing for Canada," *Gospel Herald* 24 (19 November 1931):751; *Jahrbuch*, 1935, p. 80; *Jahrbuch*, 1938, p. 32; L.J. Burkholder, pp. 170-71.
- 22 David Toews, "Immigration und Nothilfe," *Jahrbuch*, 1934, p. 66.
- 23 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution* (Altona, Man.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1962), p. 300.
- 24 "Relief Work," *Gospel Herald* 30 (21 October 1937):625-27.
- 25 *Jahrbuch*, 1931, p. 23.
- 26 "The Sewing Circles of Ontario," *Calendar of Appointments*, 1934, p. 34.
- 27 CGC, XV-31.2, "1930-Depression," P.A. Braun, Mt. Lehman, B.C., to The Editor, Derksen Printers, Steinbach, 8 January 1971.
- 28 E.K. Francis, "Mennonite Contributions to Canada's Middle West," *Mennonite Life* IV (April 1949):41.
- 29 David Toews, "Immigration und Nothilfe," *Jahrbuch*, 1934, pp. 68-69, 70.
- 30 CGC, XV-31.2, "1930-Old Colony," Paper by Abram Driedger, given at MCC (Canada) consultation, 13 May 1981.
- 31 PAA, 69.289/498, firm of Hudson, Ormond, Spice and Symington of Winnipeg to Premier Brownlee, 19 July 1928.
- 32 See, for example, CMCA, XXV-24, Vol. 674, "A Petition of the Mennonites Termed 'Sommerfelder Gemeinde' to the Dominion Government," c. 4 August 1926. See also PAA, Accession No. 69.289/498, Hand-written, unsigned letter to "Honorable Gentlemen" by a person or persons "Representing the Reinlaender Old Colony Mennonites Still Living in Canada."
- 33 The Alberta government categorically denied it had awarded any special education privileges to the Altkolonier or anyone else. The provincial Minister of Agriculture, writing to C.W. Reimer of Steinbach, Manitoba, on May 16 1927, declared that his government had "given no special privileges, in connection with this matter or any other, to anyone. The rights of all citizens are equal and their obligations as citizens are equal." PAA, 69.289/498.
- 34 Interview with T.D. Regehr, 3 July 1981.
- 35 GAI, 1743, Box 125, File 1222. C.A. Buchanan, CCA District Superintendent, Edmonton, "Memorandum to Winnipeg Office," 14 May 1934. See also "Mennonites Settling 300 Families on Land in Carcajou District," *Peace River Record* (11 May 1934):1.

- 36 When the Altkolonier settled in the Fort Vermilion district, the provincial government refused to permit the establishment of traditional village layouts. The Altkolonier were forced to acquire land in minimum parcels of quarter sections, the same as other homesteaders. The socio-religious structure of the Altkolonier settlements was thus dealt a devastating blow which had enormous repercussions, especially as other people moved in alongside them.
- 37 John A. Hostetler, "Pioneering in the Land of the Midnight Sun," *Mennonite Life* 3 (April 1948):7.
- 38 Edward W. Van Dyke, "Blumenort: A Study of Persistence in a Sect" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alberta, 1972), p. 31.
- 39 John A. Hostetler, p. 7.
- 40 *Ibid.* A 1948 figure says the Fort Vermilion settlement, as the total community became known, numbered no more than 377.
- 41 PAC, DMR, File 58764, Vol. 12, Isaak M. Dyck *et al.*, to "the Honourable Sirs" McLeod and D.C. Philip, Morden. While the letter is undated, it was received by the law firm in the middle of November 1935.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 PAC, DMR, File 58764, Vol. 13, Jacob Abrams *et al.*, to Department of Immigration and Colonization, 21 October 1935.
- 44 On 21 May 1935, Cornelius D. Fehr and 12 other farmers in Blumenfeld near Cuauhtemoc wrote directly to "The Dominion Government" re: "Entering again in our good old home Maple Leaf Country." PAC, DMR, File 58764, Vol. 13.
- 45 PAC, DMR, File 58764, Vol. 13, F.C. Blair, Assistant Deputy Minister, Department of Immigration and Colonization, to Cornelius D. Fehr, Blumenfeld, Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua, Mexico, 20 June 1935.
- 46 Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 148-59.
- 47 Marshall Hail, "Mexico's Picturesque Mennonites Flee Their Homes as Result of Disagreement on Education of Their Children," *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, 8 February 1936.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 GAI, 1743, Box 125, File 1222, W.R. Dick, "Memorandum for Head Office," 19 April 1934.
- 51 CGC, XV-31.2, "1930-Coaldale," T.D. Regehr to Frank H. Epp, 18 August 1980.
- 52 *Ibid.* See also Walter D. Young, *The Anatomy of a Party: The National CCF, 1932-61* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), pp. 42-44; Norman F. Priestley and Edward B. Swindlehurst, *Furrows, Faith and Fellowship* (Edmonton: Co-op Press, 1967).

- 53 GAI, 1743, Box 125, File 1222, W.R. Dick to Benjamin Janz, Coaldale, 18 April 1934.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church, May 23, 1976, 1976*, p. 8.
- 56 Henry Paetkau, "A Struggle for Survival: The Russian Mennonite Immigrants in Ontario, 1924-1939" (M.A. thesis, University of Waterloo, 1977), pp. 54-55.
- 57 *Ibid.*, pp. 55-57.
- 58 J. Winfield Fretz, "Recent Mennonite Community Building in Canada," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (January 1944):9.
- 59 Ian MacPherson, *The Cooperative Movement on the Prairies, 1900-1955*, The Canadian Historical Association Booklets, No. 33, Ottawa, 1979.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 61 J. Winfield Fretz, p. 9.
- 62 The Niagara Credit Union.
- 63 David Phillip Reimer, "The Mennonites of British Columbia" (research essay, University of British Columbia, 1946), pp. 43-48.
- 64 J. Winfield Fretz, pp. 16-17.
- 65 B.B. Wiens, "Pioneering in British Columbia," *Mennonite Life* 1 (July 1946):10.
- 66 In conversation with J. Winfield Fretz, 17 August 1943. For accounts of similar Russlaender co-operative ventures in other areas, cf. Ted Regehr, "Mennonite Change: The Rise and Decline of Mennonite Community Organizations at Coaldale, Alberta," *Mennonite Life* 32 (December 1977):13-22; and "The Fruit and Vegetable Industry in Ontario," *Mennonite Life* 5 (October 1950):24-26.
- 67 E.K. Francis, "Mennonite Contributions to Canada's Middle West," *Mennonite Life* 4 (July 1949), p. 41.
- 68 Ian MacPherson, *Each for All: A History of the Cooperative Movement in English Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1979). See pp. 59 and 114 for reference to Mennonite involvement in the co-ops already in the 1920s. A detailed account of the movement in southern Manitoba can be found in Robert Meyers, *Spirit of the Post Road: A Story of Self-Help Communities* (Altona: The Federation of Southern Manitoba Cooperatives, 1955).
- 69 Robert Meyers, pp. 11-12.
- 70 *Ibid.*, pp. 11-22. The elected officers for the Society during its first year were J.G. Neufeld, president; J.J. Siemens, vice-president; P.D. Reimer, secretary-treasurer.
- 71 David Schroeder and Menno Klassen in an interview with the author, 1 April 1972. See CGCA, XV-31.2, "1930-J.J. Siemens." The comparison applies if the focus is economic and community leadership, but not if ideologies are considered, because Siemens was

less capitalistic than Cornies and Cornies less socialistic than Siemmens.

- 72 D.K. Friesen, "I Remember J.J. Siemens (1896-1963), a Steward of the Earth of the Lord," *The Canadian Mennonite* 14 (13 June 1967):48.
- 73 Psalm 24:1.
- 74 D.K. Friesen, p. 48.
- 75 Keith Dryden, "College for Cooperators," *The Western Producer Magazine* (December 1965):17,19.
- 76 CGC, XV-31.2, "1940-J.J. Siemens," "Report to Rhineland Trustee Association," n.d.
- 77 CGC, XV-31.2, "1950-J.J. Siemens," "Federation Annual Meeting, November 23, 1945."
- 78 Robert Meyers, pp. 34-47.
- 79 J.A. Kroeker, "The Crosstown Credit Union," *Mennonite Life* 4 (July 1949):32.
- 80 CGCA, XV-31.2, "1940-J.J. Siemens," "Education in the Ideals of Cooperation," n.d.
- 81 CGCA, XV-31.2, "1950-J.J. Siemens," "Your President's Message," n.d.
- 82 Robert Meyers, p. 29.
- 83 CGC, XV-31.2, "1940-J.J. Siemens," J.J. Siemens to Mary Loewen, n.d.
- 84 J. Winfield Fretz, "The Renaissance of a Rural Community," *Mennonite Life* 1 (January 1946):15-16.
- 85 CGC, XV-31.2, "1930-Agriculture," "Protokoll der Versammlung der Initiativgruppe zwecks Gruendung einer mennonitischen landwirtschaftlichen Genossenschaft, abgehalten am 8. November 1933 auf der Farm von Herrn Abram Rogalsky, Glenlea, Man." See also CMCA, Benjamin Ewert Papers.
- 86 CGC, XV-31.2, "1930-J.J. Siemens." E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona, Man.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1955), p. 225.
- 87 *Ibid.*, p. 225 ff., attributes the difference in attitude displayed to the co-op movement by the respective reserves in part to their divergent denominational backgrounds.
- 88 "The car dealers put Steinbach on the map" in *Reflections on Our Heritage: A History of Steinbach and the R.M. of Hanover from 1874*, ed. Abe Warkentin (Steinbach, Man.: Derksen Printers, 1971), pp. 106-11.
- 89 E.K. Francis, "Mennonite Contribution to Canada's Middle West," *Mennonite Life* 4 (April 1949), p. 41.
- 90 PAC, RG. 30, Vol. 5642, File 7500-1, Arthur H. Unruh, "Mennonites," a memorandum to F.J. Freer, Canadian National Railways, 3 January 1930.

- 91 E.K. Francis, p. 229.
- 92 Abe Warkentin, pp. 94–127, 182 ff.
- 93 E.K. Francis, p. 229.
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