ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

OF

RUSSIAN-MENNONITE IMMIGRANTS

OF THE 1920's (Ontario)

Interview #33, Part 1 in the series of oral history interviews conducted by Henry Paetkau, Graduate History Student at the University of Waterloo on behalf of Conrad Grebel College under the direction of Walter Klaassen.

Date of Interview: Friday, August 13, 1976, 10:00-12:00

Place of Interview: Residence of the Interviewee

Interviewee: Mr. Henry Hiebert
37 Jackson Ave.
Kitchener, Ontario

Interview Part 1 comprises Tape #37, Sides A and B

INTERVIEW:

PAETKAU: When and where you were born and a little bit about your family background.

HIEBERT: I was born on the 3rd of October, 1896. At that time it was the 20th of September, old style. I was born on an estate, big estate that the Mennonites had in Russia too. The richer people that came from Russia that had money, or got rich here in Russia, they bought big estates. I mean big thousands of land, maybe 2,000-5,000, 10,000 acres at that time. That was in . But they bought it very cheap from Russia nobles. They had it earned by some deeds. I would say maybe that it was an army officer, maybe it was a general, maybe it was something else. And the Tsar at that time would give him a title and would give him so much land with the serfs on it. Now this land that that man bought didn't have any serfs but there were Russian villagers around it. And he bought 9,000 acres. He had sheep at that time probably, 5,000, 8,000 maybe 10,000 sheep. And my father worked for a man that had a smaller estate. And he came from a colony, from Steinfeld. And he didn't like these sheep. He was a grain farmer. So when he was hired by this Mr. Schrader (?) he told him right away, "Can't we change the system more for grain and less for sheep?" He says, "Yes, you do just what you want." So my father started right away. He ploughed more pasture down. He got rid of more sheep and sheep barns and so on and he built grainery for wheat. Finally out of the 9,000 acre there probably was about 1,000 left for pasture, for buildings for roads, and stuff like that. The rest was all wheat farm. Then he divided

this 9,000 acres in three lots because it was too far to draw the grain and so on. So he put it in 3 lot and in each lot he had a steam thresh outfit and he had a barn and a kitchen for the working men. In the summer time in our three places he had about 160 people working for him. Mostly Russian people that he hired in a neighbourhood villages, Russian villages. They were boys and girls, men and women, hired mostly by the day or by the week. Some he had that took care of the cattle once and others maybe by the year but very few. We had about 300 pair oxen there at that time when I remember it. And maybe 60 pair horses, different horses not just work horses; riding for the boys. He had at one time even a couple camels. I guess just for fun. Of course these 160 people they had to work during the week and then at the weekened they were paid their wages and then the weekend they went home to their Russian villages and Sunday evening they came back. So we were supplied with labour. I don't know that those years--I was bornthere in 1896 and while I was going to school we didn't have a village school. We had a house school The Schraders(?) they had a teacher for their children and we went to that school too. So the school probably was about 8-10 children, that's all. And we had a teacher for those 8-10 children. We didn't have any church. We didn't have any Bible study. We didn't have any Sunday School. Nothing of that kind so I grew up something like the Heathen except for what mother teached me. That's all I had. But later on when I went to the high school in Halbstadt then of course I got acquainted with the church, church life and different school life and so on. Finally after the schooling I went to the high school then I was supposed to be a teacher. I had six brothers and they all learned a trade through But I was the weakest in the family and the parents thought I should take the courses for high education. Either in the office or for teacher or something like that. But then the war came and I was conscripted in a army and because I had some education I didn't want to be just soldier in the army I wanted to be a little bit more than that. And it happened so--I will include a little bit about this life here on that estate. They had an automobile because they were rich. The old people they already died so the young people they were there alone. They got visitors from Halbstadt; that's about 75 miles from us. They got visitors young people there. After they visited about a week they were supposed to be taken home on Monday to Halbstadt and they wanted this automobile to be ready. So they told me on Sunday to wash that car and have it ready for morning. But they told me because I didn't know how to drive automobile they told me I should take some Russian boys and girls and push that car out to the well and wash it and push it back into the garage again. But they had visitors and they had party there till about 2:00-3:00 in the morning so I knew they would be sleeping fast at 6:00 in the morning. So I went up at 6:00 in the morning and instead of pushing the car out I took it back myself. I cranked it and drove the car out myself. It was a risk but I did it. I knew so much I was already 18 years old and I saw how they were driving

the car. I went sometimes for a ride with them. I knew everything. It's just the same as the boys now, 18 years they know how to drive a car. So I drove it to the well, washed it, cleaned it and I cranked it again and drove it into the garage and stopped in the right spot. Closed the door and said nothing about it. Now here it is. When I came into the army we were out oh I would say probably 20 miles from here. That's where they had the barracks for all the conscripts. And we were marching there. But the sargent there he wanted to have a little bit life in it and he asked whether there was a man that could play accordian. Nobody said that he could. So I said I can a little bit by ear you know. I didn't have any notes or anything. "Can you play waltz?" "Yes, I can." "Can you play march?" "A couple marches" You know by ear. So he told me to play a march while they were marching--I mean gymnastic. So I was musician over there the first couple weeks and now it happened that the engineer from garage in K came over and he wanted to have three chauffers. Of course this story is in a book too. And he wanted to have three chauffers that knew how to drive cars because the Russian army had chauffers but mostly private chauffers. They cost a lot of money and very often they were not confident ; they were drunk. They often were drunk because they were private; they were not soldiers. Now they wanted some soldier chauffers and they heard about these Mennonites from southern part of Russia and they heard that they were honest people and good working people and they could trust them. So they wanted chauffers from these Mennonites. There were two. One was Hildebrandt. He is now in Leamington. And the other one his cousin Daniels. I don't know where he is now. But he wanted three. And he says, "Isn't there somebody there that didn't drive a car or didn't have a car and still know how to drive?" So I stepped out. Well O.K. he took us right away. All our baggage and went to , settled in a garage there. They gave us a place to live and then he engineer. He says, "We will make tests now." You know, theoretical. He asked me--no the other two boys they knew how to drive a car. They knew every answer to that but I was absolutely young in this experience so I thought, "I wonder how that will come out?" So he asked me , "Did you drive through villages?--no he asked me, "Did you kill any dogs?" I said, "No." "Well," he says, "You must be a good chauffer if you didn't kill any dogs in the Russian village." Because they were there in such abundance that you could hardly go through a village without killing a dog. But he didn't ask me whether I drove through a village and I didn't say it either. Then he said, "Did you kill any men." And I said, "No". "Did you hurt any men." I says, "No." Well then it's O.K. And that's what my examination was. Then of course the next day they gave me a T-model Ford; a little pick up truck.

HIEBERT: But it was good. I had to go to the front about 400 miles from Kiev to V_____. But they gave me a private chauffer to teach me on a highway how to drive and so on. So by the time I made those 800-1,000 miles I was a confident chauffer. That's how it went. Up and up and up I got. Bigger cars and finally I got the bus. I had the bus in Kiev and I had to take wounded people from the station to a village in a big hospital in Svijatoshono. That was about 20 miles from Kiev. So I took the wounded ones to the hospital and the recuperated ones (healed ones) I took to the station. They could go home on leave. That was my job for quite a while.

PAETKAU: How were you treated generally as a German in the Russian Army? Or didn't that make any difference?

HIEBERT: Well, you see we were conscripted in Melitopol and then we were sent to Kharkov. In Kharkov they divided us into two groups One group went to the Caucasus because we were Germans and they didn't want us to be on the German front. The Red Army on the Turkish front at the Caucasus there. One group was taken to Kiev, probably the ones that he thought would go into garages and stuff like that. Otherwise they didn't treat us bad; not at that time. And because the Mennonites already showed him--I was conscripted in 1915 when the war started in 1914. They already knew the value of a Mennonite Red Cross. I mean the people that worked in hospitals or on the trains or whatever it was, helping the wounded. They had confidence in them. We three had it very very good in the garage in Kiev.

PAETKAU: Did any of the Mennonites feel more a support for the Germans rather than for the Russians or ....

HIEBERT: No we Mennonites as a rule, there might be one exception but as a whole we were patriotic. We loved Russia. We had our home there and we had good living. So we were thankful that we could stay in Russia and be in Russia and help Russia. There was not a bit, I would say, leaning towards the Germans or Germany country. As far as I know--at least I didn't have it. I was staying for Russia and helping Russia in what capacity it was. No I was working through the army from 1915-1917 as a chauffer. Then from 1917-1918 it was already a revolution. Then I was chauffer. Then in 1918 when the German Occupational Army came to Ukraine. I guess you don't know how that happened. Well you see Ukraine wanted to be independent from Russia. They sent silently, quietly or secretly, delegation to the German front and they made agreement with the German army that they would have a separate peace--the Ukraine would have a separate peace with the understanding that the Germans would send their army to Russia to clean up the Communists, to chase them away from Ukraine except border alliance and protect Ukraine from the Communists.

HIEBERT: For that of course the Ukraine promised grain, food, meat, different stuff to help the German army in their fight in the war. And that's what they were doing. And this time when the German Army (Lundorf(?) Army) came to Ukraine they passed our village from Adas Augizon (?) Melitropol and then that unit there asked for an interpreter. So I volunteered to be an interpreter in that German Army. I was in Melitropol in Hoch(?) Commander Tour of the Germany Army. I helped him interpret.

PAETKAU: How did the Mennonites feel about the German Army coming in and occupying.....?

HIEBERT: Well they were of course relieved from what happened already before the army came because the Communists they really were rough . And the German estate people and other villagers some people they escaped--the estate people at least they escaped and went to Halbstadt because they couldn't live in their estates. There were too many killings there already because the Russian villages, the bandits they came and robbed and killed so we were glad that we had protection. We were glad that we had protection and we helped them in any way we could. That's why I went as an interpreter. On one hand I didn't want the Germans to persecute people that were innocent so I helped that way. On the other hand I thought I could direct him to certain lines where they could grap the right one. And I helped that way. I was in the Commander Tour from May till November 11th when the German Army capitulated. When they lost the war. When they had to sign that Armistice with the English and Americans. So at that time the German Army had to leave everything and they went back to Germany and I stayed back in Russia in Melitropol because there was nothing for me. At that time I went to Halbstadt because my brother, second oldest brother was working as a machinist by a Mr. Willms. He had a flour miller and he was a machinist. So he had a house there to live in and my father stayed there. My mother died in 18--just before the Germans came so I was alone and I didn't want to be a burden to my brother. He had already my father there. So I joined the Selbstschutz. I joined the Schtrolbul (?) Adrab (?) You know Schtrolbul(?) group. We were about 20-30 men there, all on horses. And I stayed there in this Schtrobul A (?) I would say to have contact between the villages. You know, some would hear about something--Makhno coming up or something like that then we would right away give word to the other villages to be prepared. Otherwise I was never in fight. I just was watching the bridges or the crossroads or something like that. Then after the Selbstschutz--yah after the Germans left then of course Ukraine was laid bare to the Communists and they of course came in big groups you know and attacked peaceful people there in the Ukraine. Most hate they had was these German Mennonites and Lutherans and Catholics. It doesn't matter as long as they were German. But I guess the Menno-

HIEBERT (cont'd): nites they were not safe because they were Mennonites. Because we welcomed the Germans, because we had the Selbstschutz then we suffered a lot after that. Then of course at this time the Generals that were still in the Ukraine and Admirals and Officers and quite a few people that did not go with the Communists they were against the Communists. And they organized an army. They called it the White Army. That's exactly the stage where the White Army started to work against the Red Army. Started from the Crimea and from the Caucasus. Caucasus was a very good place to start because the Caucasus had many Cossacks. The Cossacks didn't like the Communists either. They were against it. They always worked for the government, I mean the Cossacks themselves. So this White Army, at that time it was General Denikin. He started the White Army. There was Admiral Koljak he was in Siberia. He pressed from Siberia against the Ural Mountains and Denikin started from the Caucasus and from Crimea to watch the Ural Mountains and that's where they wanted to join and then go against Moscow. You know, finish the Communists. But that came different. Denikin went quite fast. I remember that at time I was in the White Army. Because I was a chauffer I was given a truck in the armored division We had four Austin armoured cars, four trucks, four motorcycles and so on, all four. And all were managed by Mennonites. There was two chauffers--Neufeldts, Wilhelm and Herman from Selkafeld (?) and there was Peter Fedroe from Halbstadt. Peter Fedroe that was a brother of Nick Fedroe that is here in our congregation, the choir leader years ago. That was his brother. I worked with him a couple years in this armoured division. He had a truck. We came on the 16th of July, 1919 we came to Stalingrad. It used to be Tsaritsyn on the Volga. Later it was Stalingrad and that's where the big setback for the German Army came in 1943 or 1944 probably where the fighting for Germans was against the Russians house to house, house to house. I could follow that because I lived at Tsaritsyn quite a few months. I need that city myself. I pulled a truck out of the Volga at that time with another truck. I put a chain on and pulled it out. Then of course the magnet was gone. So I got a hold of a magnet set it in and since then I drove that little truck instead of the big truck that I was driving before. Something that I could do myself without asking my officers. They said everything I did was alright
Then we lost later on the fight. We didn't come to the Caucasus. We came closer to Samara, Saratov, closer to those villages. And in the meantime Koljak didn't come to the Ural Mountains. It happened this way. I know it because we were waiting on guard of our army and Koljak's army soon was supposed to meet. We would soon join hands with Koljak and we were waiting for that moment. Then something happened. What happened was this. Koljak had taken into his army some of Chek(?) prisoner. You know Russia took quite a

HIEBERT (cont'd): few prisoners in the army. And the Cheks (?) were sent to Siberia to work there. There was quite a big group of Cheks(?). They offered Koljak they would come and help him fight against the Communists. So he accepted. Now just imagine. I don't know just how many there were but there were a couple 1,000's of them. They were giving White Army uniforms, ammunition and everything and there was supposed to give big turn down on the field--big offensive. Everything was prepared carefully. The railroad station not far had a train with ammunition and stuff like that--ready for the White Army to have supply taken from those trains there. Everything was settled. And what happened that morning, early at night--these Cheks put on the red marks to their sleeves and to their caps--red marks. I guess they joined the Communists without the White Army knowing it. And in the morning when the offensive was supposed to start now the Koljak's army was surrounded right from the beginning by the Communists front and from the sides. Not from the back but from both sides they were attacked and that of course, that offensive was lost. They lost the war in Siberia and Koljak was taken prisioners and he was executed later on . And Denikin himself, alone now he was quite far advanced already along the Volga towards the Ural Mountian, had to retreat because Stalin took all the army from Siberia and from Ural and from the north there against Denikin and they chased him back--we were retreating. At that time I had typhoid fever. I came up right to the front but now I was sick with tyhpoid fever and they took me to Commission(?) then later on to Syzran and finally to Restolf(?). That's where my hospital went to. I was sick there for I don't know how long, a month probably with tyhoid fever. Tyhoid fever (end of tape so part of conversation was missed)...and then you get better again and a couple days or a couple weeks later you get it back again. I was sick a couple days later. So by the time I was out our army was retreated. Close to Christmas they sent our unit to Ekaterinodat (?) Caucasus. And from there they sent us to Novotroisk in the Caucasus. The Communist army pressed and pushed us so we left Caucasus entirely and went to the Crimea. That was our foothold then. Denikin resigned, he went to England and Wrangel took over the armies. Now he had just the people here around Crimea but he organized it and he went again ahead along the Dnepr. This time not Volga it was along the Dnepr. There was quite a few fighting--fighting done in the villages too. One village probably will go from the Reds to the Whites and from the Whites to the Reds and it was terrible at that time for the villagers too. But they advanced again but I don't think they went very far They never came close to Moscow even. They retreated again. I was lucky at that time. I didn't make this offensive with Wrangel as I did with Denikin. Then I was in the front lines like--in this division--this armoured division. This time there was a captain and three other officers they organized it in an armoured car like. We started in Kerch and they told

HIEBERT (cont'd): me to ask--to find out a good truck--a good truck amongst all those cars and trucks that were standing there. So I found an Asanoch(?); a big five ton truck. So we took it to the Vistugal(?) and in the Vistugal(?) we occupied a factory and we settled there in a factory. Now we were going to build not an armoured car but a destroyer of an armoured car. That was the armoured car. So that was in May, June, July, August, we always building this; putting more armoured on, more here, more there, putting an extra carburetor on, extra magnet on and that took time. I don't know, I didn't mind it because I had hardly anything to do just to say what I wanted it. But the captian he always, you know, when we decided to put the second magnet on, second carburetor on then he had to run around till he found it. Then we would start putting it on. So it was fall already before that machine really was good. The first time I went out with that destroyer of tanks the water was boiling. I didn't go very far. It was too heavy. Everything was too heavy. None of us was engineers. We just thought that would be good but we loaded it on and loaded it on. It was too much for that truck motor. But here was something; when it was ready to go then the Communist army was close to the Vistugal(?), all we did is that way the officers, generals in the White Army they were loading on ships in the Vistugal and we knew it. So he said our duty is now to control the streets of outskirts of Vistugal nobody will protect the Communists that live in the Vistugal by preventing the White Army to embark and go to Bulgaria or Turkey whatever it is, across the Black Sea. In this case we went around and they already took their suitcases with them, you know, the officers. They wanted to stay in the Vistugal and I told them I'm staying here because I had a girl in Alexanderkrone and I wanted to marry here and why should I go again with the White Army to Bulgaria or Turkey and then come back again and fight again. I would stay just as well here. And I did. So I unloaded them and went back to the factory where I lived and then I took this armoured automobile and started the motor and put it in gear and geared it towards the Black Sea and I pushed it in the Black Sea. That's what I did. That was the end of the armoured destroyer. And I was here alone. There is the story what happened to me in the Vistugal. It's quite interesting how the Lord saved me. Everytime I was in danger.

PAETKAU: How were the Mennonites treated in the White Army? Were they quite well respected?

HIEBERT: Oh yah. We were as mechanics or as chauffers or as Red Cross helpers and so on we were respected. Even the papers said that the Tsar and the Tsarina they mentioned, they complimented as people that were honest, that were clean, that were working with the government not against the government.

PAETKAU: Were there quite a number of Mennonites in the White Army?

HIEBERT: Oh Yah. There was quite a number. A lot of our Mennonites that worked in foresty-they were sent to different forestries even up to Siberia and other northern parts and so on. There were quite a few trains manned just by Mennonites. There was hospitals that they had a lot of helpers in the hospitals.

PAETKAU: What about the Russian army? During the war then were there a lot of Mennonites in that army as well?

HIEBERT: No there were no Mennonites. Maybe an occasional one or two that wanted to be in the army. But we didn't have to go into the military. We had a privilege to choose our works either in the forestry or as sanitation; the way I would say in the Red Cross.

PAETKAU: What were conditions like on the front? You mentioned that you were on the front quite a bit on one offensive.

HIEBERT: Well here is something. I was in Keiv , we went to the front, that was the German front. My part was to take some stuff for a army, for a kitchen and stuff like that to the front. And then bring from the front something that had to be fixed, kettles or kitchens, whatever it was. That was my little truck there for. At that time the Russian army didn't make much progress. They were retreating. And that's because the Russian army was--had a bad supply in everything--whether it was food, clothing or other stuff. Even ammunition and so on, it was in bad supply. Russian railroad in 1915-1916 already was deteriorating. They were not repaired as they should be, kept up as they should be and they went down. I know one answered that happened that probably was a mistake of somebody of the generals. They got supply of boots, the Russian boots up to the knee, leather boots. So one army got the leather boots for a left foot and the other army got it for a right foot. Now just imagine those poor soldiers walking with two different boots. Something like that happened. Then another thing they were supposed to go against a German artillery and these artilleries they were good shooters. They were good trained soldiers but they didn't have ammunition. They didn't have enough supply. So what could they do ? Just turn around and go back. The trained soldiers that were trained at that time they didn't have rifles to train with they had wooden rifles; just to train. But they didn't even have enough rifles for the army. And for the clothing the same when the winter came they still were in the summer clothing, summer uniforms. And the Russian winters can be real cold. The Germans were supplied better with winter gear than the Russians themselves. That was 1915-1916. And that's exactly when the Russian peasant, the farmer, and the soldier of course on the front. They would discuss the working men in the cities like Moscow, Petrigrad--at that time they callled it Petrigrad or later on they called it Leningrad, it used

HIEBERT (cont'd): to be Petersburg. The people over there they didn't have enough to eat. They had to work but enough to feed a family. And that's where the grumbling started. That's where the revolution started. And the Tsar himself he was weak. He wasn't a smart fellow at all.

PAETKAU: Talking about the Tsar. How did the Mennonites feel about the Tsar and his regime?

HIEBERT: Well we Mennonites we believed that time just the same as we now--if we lived somewhere we pray for our government and we did pray for the Tsar too. It's not that we were Tsarists or what do you call it, 100% for everything that the Tsar did but we were citizens of Russia and we prayed for the Tsar. He could depend on us. Whatever duty he--we would give it. We would not go against it. And I don't think that anybody of the Mennonites was in that revolution trend. I don't think so.

PAETKAU: How did they feel then when the revolution started and the Tsar was executed?

HIEBERT: Well for us it was hard strike for us because we knew that as long as the Tsar was--at least most of the time, we could depend that the Tsar would protect us. Because at that time when the villages were growing and showing off in steps(?)--at that time some of the Tsars like Alexander and they visited the villages. And we had praise of every Tsar that was there. They praised the Mennonites. They praised the German colonies. Even now you can see it in the list of the villages there was Alexanderkrone, Alexanderwol, Alexandertol, all remembering Alexander you know. We were for monarchy. I remember -- well I mentioned that in that there book too--the government sent from Peter--you know at that time Moscow was there but Moscow wasn't the capital. Petersburg was the capital, Petrigrad. And at the time Petrigrad sent a group of officers from Russian army to southern Russia to these colonies to learn how to farm and how to manage land, and how to raise cattle and how to grow trees, fruit trees and other trees, sheep, whatever it is. They had to learn it from the Mennonites.

PAETKAU: You mentioned before that when you were on the estate and all the Russian people working on the estate and so on; what was the relationship like between the Mennonite farmers say or the Mennonite people and the Russian people that were working for them?

HIEBERT: Well at that time my father was manager there . And in the summertime we had up to 160 hired people. But my father knew those people that he hired last year and he knew where he would go this year again. And they gladly came and worked

HIEBERT (cont'd): for him. My father would give them the right wages as prevailed at that time. He would settle the wages every Saturday. He would give them their pay. There was absolutely no grumbling or anything. They would gladly come and work for these Mennonite. They knew they were Mennonites. But they worked for them because they themselves didn't have any other means to make money--extra money--as by these Mennonites. So their relation was good. But of course it changed when the Germans attacked Russia and we fighting against the Germans. Then of course quite a few villages they had people there. Not all but some people they would come and attack the people on these colonies or attack the estate people. So they disappeared. They went to Halbstadt. They got protected there. But my father stayed and they didn't do anything to him. Like in the peace time before the war Mrs. Shrader and her daughter they often would go to these villages and they heard probably of some poor people maybe some sick or other distressed people. They would come and help do what they could. They were not afraid to go alone into the Russia village and visit poor people there. They helped them with clothing, food or whatever it was. There was absolutely no animosity at that time. It just started when the war was there. Then of course the papers were against the Germans. Of course they were against them. I mean--now the paper does a lot of harm. So it was over there too. But my father wasn't molested at all. Even if he had to do with 160 people in the summertime. There was not one that would come and threaten him because they knew he was one of those that worked; one of those that was hired. And he always tried to give the right man the right job. The food was good, well as good at that time as they could expect. We had everything; vegetables, meat, milk.

PAETKAU: What happened now after the White Army collapsed and you stayed behind?

HIEBERT: Well when the Red Army came into Ukraine then we had really two enemies; the Red Army was an enemy and Makhno . He was a gang leader; a robber, a killer. He attacked too because he lived there. He knew quite a few German villages. He knew quite a few German people. He revenged. He had no reason for it but he did. We suffered from both of it. I know the first--that's why we had the Selbstschutz that we organized. We wanted to have night watchmen in every village at the end of the village. As soon as he noticed something that somebody was coming he had to send somebody to the next village and give word. That village would send it to the next one and this way we were all ready if something would happen. But what happened now, one case is this--it was terrible. There's a group of these Makhnos came into the village, I couldn't say now was it a Mennonite or a Lutheran Village; they lived close together. Not missed up but close together. They came into that village

HIEBERT (cont'd): and the bandits they had mostly on horses and wagons with machine gun on it. And they came into this village. One soldier he had a gun, a rifle and of course it was in the daytime, inthe morning I guess. The boys and girls were playing on the street so he picked one up with his rifle. Took him on and lifted him in the air and that's the way he went through the village. That's how they started. And there was nothing that we could do because we were too small to fight against Makhno and we were too small to fight against the Red Army and we didn't want to fight against the Red Army. But we wanted to protect our old people, our children, our women and so on. Our weak ones we protected them as much as we could with this Selbstschutz. That's how the difference--that's at least how I saw my duty when I was in the Selbstschutz. I just wanted to protect the weak ones. Of course the Russians they saw every Mennonite as a helper to the German Army. Because they thought we were Germans--well of course they talked about we are getting money from Germany, we are getting food from Germany. But that was not so. It was just talk among the Russian people but they could believe it. Then of course that was just not one village that was in a whole colony. That was in a whole district that we suffered. Then when the Red Army soldiers came they settled in the villages. They occupied the villages and stayed there. We had to feed them even if we didn't have much ourselves. Very seldom they would go into Russian village because the Russian villages they didn't have those buildings that we had. You know bigger houses, bigger rooms and bigger windows and better furniture and so on. We had it. But most of the Russians they lived in little shacks most of the time. Just a few were different. So that the Communist army, the Red Army didn't occupy those Russian villages, they occupied the German villages. And we suffered that. They were bleeding us out.

PAETKAU: Did they mistreat people too?

HIEBERT: Oh yes. They mistreated people. They mistreated people! And there was one village, somebody of the Selbstschutz he probably couldn't stand the treatment of his family so he shot one. And that was too bad. Then of course the Red Army set in and they destroyed just about the whole village. They set it on fire and they put people in one house and surrounded it and set the house on fire. If anybody would run out of the burning house they would shoot him. It was terrible. But that was not only the Mennonites. Now the Cossacks they were not real Communists. They were against it. And they didn't want to be treated by the Communists badly either because they were Russians. They lived in Russia all the time. We Mennonites we came from Germany 100 years or so ago. But these Cossacks they lived

HIEBERT (cont'd): in Russia. They were born there. They were raised there. And they couldn't understand why the Communists would treat them so badly. So they didn't obey. Now supposing the Communists demanded that they give all the guns out to the Russian army, the Communist army, but they wouldn't do it. What did the Russians do? Because they were rebels against they didn't obey their order. They surrounded the Cossack village in the Caucasus with machine gun and cannons, batteries And then they set that village on fire and then they destroyed a whole Cossack village from the oldest to the youngest nothing was left. Nothing was left. Not even a dog or a chicken. They leveled it up that Cossack village. Well then of course the other Cossacks were afraid to go against into them. So more or less they were subdued. But this is what happened really in the Caucasus. They would set president of one village and then they had won. But they were rough. As I say it wasn't just against the Mennonites. It was anything that was against them.

PAETKAU: Now you had been in the Selbstshutz and in the White Army. Was this a black mark against you after the White Army surrendered?

HIEBERT: Well after the White Army surrendered I went from the Vistobal to the colony and I got married. I got married and then that village where I got my wife from they had an election of village officials like chairman and secretary for that village. And they voted me as secretary. And from then on I worked for the Soviets as secretary. And for me it really wasn't much of a danger. I was just as much in danger as anybody else was in danger. But at that time in 1921 you know the White Army lost in 1920 and this was '21 already, everything was more or less peaceful. Of course they were shooting and so on. It was hard for me too as secretary to manage everything but I could. Somehow I went through it. And I was two years as secretary there. That was in 1921, 1922, 1923 and in 1924 I immigrated to Canada.

PAETKAU: This was in Alexanderkrone?

HIEBERT: Yes. Alexanderkrone.

PAETKAU: What would your duties be as secretary in the Soviet Administration?

HIEBERT: Well the main part was to fulfill all the orders that came from above to the village. That came from a district I would say. From a district we would have papers that would say do this or collect the tax. Most of it was collecting taxes. That was the biggest job. And I tell

HIEBERT (cont'd): you when I started with the job as secretary I got a letter from a district that was sending from Moscow. And in that letter they told us in the Soviet offices to get information of how many farmers there are, how much land we had, how much land under cultivation and how many cows we have and how many horses, chickens. Everything in detail. And much grain we had for seeding. Or how much grain we had for eating. And how many horses or cows or sheep or whatever we had. I would say a list of everything. Well we sent that in. Then we got a couple months later an order for a future tax to be fulfilled. And there was an order that if it wouldn't be fulfilled to the last then that farmer would be jailed or even be sent to Siberia and his whole farm would be confiscated by the government if he wouldn't fulfill it. Here is what they asked the farmer to do. Mind you that was stupid. How could Moscow send out an order for a tax bill like that? We had to pay so much grain, so much wheat from an acre, so much rye from an acre, so much milk from an acre. Just imagine not from a cow from an acre. So much cheese, so much beef or veal from an acre or so much pork from an acre or so much honey from an acre. So much geese from an acre, eggs from an acre and stuff like that. It was all from an acre. Now it was impossible. You could right away see that was impossible even to touch that tax bill. It was impossible but of course--so I sent--I was fresh enough and I sent in to the district a letter and I told him, "If you want to collect taxes then collect them according to the list we sent you. If a farmer had only one cow then he can't give you honey or whatever it is. If it's a cow he can give you some milk, some butter but he just can't give you anything else from that cow. So collect it from a cow, a sheep, a horse, whatever it is but don't collect it from each acre." So I didn't get an answer to that letter but from me it was kind of a freshy you know. But I took a chance. I thought there was no danger.

End of tape. Interview continued on Tape #38

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

OF

RUSSIAN-MENNONITE IMMIGRANTS

of the 1920's (Ontario)

Interview #33, part 2 in the series of oral history interviews conducted by Henry Paetkau, Graduate History Student at the University of Waterloo on behalf of Conrad Grebel College under the direction of Walter Klaassen.

Part two of the interview was conducted on Friday, August 27, 1976 between 10:00 and 11:00 a.m.

Place of Interview: Residence of interviewee

Interviewee: Mr. Henry Hiebert
37 Jackson Ave.
Kitchener, Ontario

Interview:

Hiebert: As I said before we were received at Erb St. Mennonite Church by Moses Baers, Mr. & Mrs. Moses Baer. They had one son about 14 years old and two daughters, 18 and 20 years old. And they liked to have babies. That's why they chose us, a young family with babies. So on the farm of course for me it wasn't too bad because my father he used to work on a farm. He had a acre estate. He was manager there, and I saw everything that was done there. So it wasn't strange to me to start here. One thing was sure to me, I would never say to the farmer, "Well we in Russia were doing it this way. Or we were doing it this way, or we had this machinery, we had that machinery." I would never do that. I thought the farmer was supposed to show me what he was doing and how he was doing it and what machinery he was using. Now something that was strange to me when I started to plough with one furrough plow was that I hit quite a few stones. Something that I never had in Russia. We never found stones in the ground. If we wanted to have stones we had to go far and wide to find stones. And our land over there in Russia, the top soil was at least 2-3 feet deep. That was something that was strange to me here too. I would have a field probably of 20 acres and I would plough it. On one end I would hit some sandy ground and the other end I probably would plough clay. So that was strange to me. But otherwise the work in itself was a little bit harder for me than it probably would have been if I had been here a couple of years already. Now when I came from Russia over the ocean

HIEBERT: as I said before, I never had a meal on the ship because I was sick, seasick. We came here on Saturday and on Sunday already I milked the cow. I helped just the same to do the chores as everybody else. Then we went to church, their church. Of course that was, they had it in English and we didn't understand much. It didn't help us much except for the singing. On Monday already we had to go on the hay field because the hay harvest was there. And that year it was especially heavy harvest; thick hay, hard work. And I was weak. I still wasn't strong so for me it was just about something that I thought I wouldn't endure it. But one thing was good. We had good breakfast. We had a good dinner. We could eat plenty and good food. So I always was able to go from breakfast to dinner and from dinner to supper. After supper of course we were milking the cows. Then I was free. I enjoyed that free hour or two. Then we talked. The people, the Mennonites they talked Pennsylvania Dutch. That was something that was strange to me but I understood it easily because we--in Russia we had a Lutheran and the Catholics they spoke the German what you call it, the Colonistic German. You know, like the Catholic and the Lutheran did over there. So that Pennsylvania Dutch wasn't too strange to me except for those English names that they went into it. They used English names. I got that language quick. I mean I learned quick and I started to talk Pennsylvania Dutch in a couple weeks. Of course that was a little bit harder for my wife. Well the hay harvest went and then came taking out the manure from manure pile you know, spreading it. Then of course the nice better jobs came in, ploughing for the fall. Once the wheat was threshed and oats and barley and the corn was in then we ploughed for the winter. That was a real job for me and I liked it. In the winter time we went out to the bush a couple miles away and we cut wood, fire wood, cord wood. The next winter I helped, what you call it, lumberyard, to fell some 3 acre bush just for logs so that we could use the logs in the sawmill. That was a good job. That was an easier job for me because it depended how sharp my saw was--the big saw there that we used. And I was able to sharpen my saws myself, whether it was a big one or a small one. Then Moses Baer he had about 12 cows and he was selling cream. So he was separating the milk every morning and every evening. So he had to have containers for skim milk that he was feeding to the pigs and calves and so on and he had to have containers for the cream to put away in, what you call it, ice cellar. They kept ice in a special cellar. So he asked me whether I could make those containers. And I said, "Yes." So in the winter time I was making containers out of nice tin. For me it was easy because

HIEBERT: in Russia I always used galvanized tin and here we had that nice shiny tin. And I was making quite a few containers. So that was in the winter time. In the spring I told him we should go over all the machinery like corn binder and other grain binders and anything in the machiner that it will be ready for spring or for harvest. So he let me do that. And once in the fall I wanted to visit my wife's uncle and aunt in that was probably 55 miles away from New Dundee. And he says, "Henry I wouldn't give you the horse to do that trip we will take a car. You can take the car." So I took the car. It was a 23 T Model Ford. So we went and visited her uncle and aunt and the cousins. On the way back I started early enough so we could help to milk the cows in the evening because that was my Sunday. Then I saw a buggy coming up with two horses instead of one. What I thought, because there were two horses I should give them more room on the gravel road. And I went a little bit too far to the right and I hit a stone. And hitting the stone right at my tire rod. You know between the wheels there is a tire rod and I hit it with the stone . I stopped. Then I went back and I saw my two front wheels toed in so I couldn't drive any farther. I went to the tool box and there was just plier and wire. That's all. There were no other tools to do something. I couldn't take that tire right out. So what will we do now? I couldn't waste too much time either. So I told my wife to get out of the car and stand beside the stone. You know, where the stone is. And I backed the car against that stone just enough not to go over that stone but just enough to straighten that rod. I got it straight. So after that we went out and the farmer didn't even know we had trouble. I told him the next day though. (Unintelligible) "I have to take that out, and straighten it real like the garages do. So I put it in. "Well," he says, "Henry it looks to me we don't need any mechanics here. Not this year." So with the binder it was the same thing. There was a gear it was just about broken. It was cracked. By rights he should go and order the part in New Dundee and then wait probably for a week or so until he would get it. But I fixed it. I didn't weld it but I put a wooden piece in it and wired it in and it was holding all summer, without buying a new part. The threshing of course was something different for me. I had to be in the barn and tramp down the straw. You know the machine was in the barn and the grain was brought in with a team and they were threshing there. And it was dusty and hot and dirty. The worst of it was that I had to go in that straw mow and press down, tramp down the straw so we would get more straw in. That was something that was hard for me because I wasn't used to it. I

came out dusty that I could hardly see. Well in the winter-time of course I worked in the shop there, whatever it was. I worked in the bush. So one year's time his nephew finished school so his nephew wanted to have the job as a hired man by his uncle. And he couldn't refuse him so he told me, "Henry I have to let you go." Then I went to a neighbour. In the meantime he said, "I will send all the farmers that want to hire you, to you in the shop." "You can talk to them. You can see yourself what you will do." So the farmers came from our neighbourhood. They wanted me as a hired man. Then one farmer he lived just half a mile away he had 200 acres instead of 100 acres and he said he is butchering every Friday and is attending the market in Kitchener every Saturday so he wanted me to be there like a boss on Friday and Saturday because he wouldn't be helping much on the farm. I was supposed to do it. So that was interesting to me. I took that job. The first year I was with Moses Baer I got $10.00 a month. Here by Mr. Biehn I got $35.00 a month and a free house right there on the farm. An empty house so we moved right in. I worked there for a whole year and then his son finished his school and he had to stay home. And again he told me to stop and look for something else. Then I went and rented a house on a farm, an empty farm house and I went out to work for some third farmer in weekly terms. That was a little bit--my wages were better and I was more or less free. On Sunday absolutely free and I didn't have to be on a farm just day and night. So it was better still. The fourth year I promised when we came to Canada , I promised that I would be working as a farmer. I wouldn't take any jobs away from a factory worker in Kitchener or somewhere else. So I had four years on a farm and it was the fifth year. So my brother-in-law and I we went to Kingsville; Leamington, Kingsville and he rented a farm not far from Jack Miner's. You probably know about Jack Miner's that has that wild geese sanctuary there? We lived just about a mile away from there. We had rented that on shares like 50-50. So that 50% that was coming to us we had to divide between him and myself. He had a little family and I had a family. But before we finished that year his daughter got married. And the policeman, the new son-in-law didn't want to work as a police force at he wanted to farm. So we had to give in and again I was free. Just about every year I had to move. So this time I changed my mind. I thought I am eligible now for my citizenship because--and if I am a new Canadian I have not just duties, I have privileges too. So then I got a call from my brother in Kitchener. He said they wanted a machinist in a machine shop; whether I would come and give it a try. So I came one Monday and they hired me for one week. That was their system. They would hire somebody for a week and see what he can do. At the end of the week they either would hire or fire. Well of course whatever they gave me to do I did it. I was mechanically inclined. I worked in a garage for many years. And all my brothers were skilled workers. Either

machinists or tool makers or dye makers, or something like that. So it wasn't strange to me. Whatever they gave me on Monday I thought I did a good job of it. On Tuesday morning about 9:00-10:00 the office boy came and called me into the office. Boy, I thought, now already what did I do wrong? They are not going to fire me on Tuesday? I should have been working till Saturday. I would show them that I can do something. But it was different when I came into the office. They told me that Henry said we saw we working yesterday and today and we are glad that we found somebody that we can trust the job. You are hired. And to show you that we like to prove that we appreciate what you can do we hire always for 40¢ an hour but we will give you 42½¢ an hour already, the first week. So you didn't lose a single hour we started you from Monday already paying 42½¢ an hour. And that's how I started in the machine shop. I worked in a machine shop for over 30 years. A couple years later they made me a lead man operator. Then I was supervisor over a group. After 1936 the foreman died and the night foreman was supposed to be day foreman. And I was supposed to take night foreman job but I refused it. I didn't do it then. Because by that time we had 7 children. I didn't want to be away every day sleeping and at night in the job. That was no good for a family man. I worked over 30 years. Now I am glad I stuck it out. The pension that I am getting there helps me out very much because the government pension is not enough to live on.

PAETKAU: How did you find the immigrants were treated by the Canadians? What was the attitude of Canadians to the immigrants?

HIEBERT: The immigrants were treated very well. Especially in my square, in the machine shop and Dominion Tire factory and so on. They were given the jobs in the tire factory. Promotion went very fast, even to the immigrants. Because there were so many people that talked German, there were other people like Russians or Romanians and so on that worked there already years they always would communicate. There was absolutely no set back for immigrants.

PAETKAU: You told me last time about how you came to learn the English language.

HIEBERT: Well in the machine shop, yes. Soon as I came into the machine shop I knew that if I wanted to be promoted or get ahead in a machine shop at least I needed reading of blueprints. So I took a course in a high school night course at that time. Not so much in drawing as it was in blueprint reading. So I learned both and that helped me a lot. Already they talked English over there. I had to do it too. Then that year when we were on shares in Kingsville there on a farm the boss was English. He was true English. He didn't speak German at all. So whatever conversation we had we had to have it in English. That year I learned quite a bit of English. Then soon my children started to go to school. Then of course I helped him with the

homework and I went along with the first reader, the second reader and the third reader. They went and so did I. And that's how I learned the English language. Then besides I always read the newspaper. That helped me. Then I started to read English books and that helped me. And then later on we got a radio in our house and the English announcement they helped me. So I really don't know it--I never went to school here in Canada to learn something. I still I have a light vocabulary in English. I know my accent is bad but I still understand everything. When I read books out of the library I don't care whether it's in Russian, English or in German. They are all three easy for me to read. Of course spelling that's different. Today I can write a letter to my grandchildren, maybe a page and I have 15-20 mistakes, spelling mistakes. I really can't get to it because I didn't go to school. I never had the grammar. And I believe the English language hasn't got much of a grammar. Have they?

PAETKAU: They have too much grammar. Too many different rules.

HIEBERT: Oh yah. Probably many instances you have to guess.

PAETKAU: You have to memorize.

HIEBERT: Memorize. Yes.

PAETKAU: Did you follow the political scene in Canada at all when you first came in?

HIEBERT: Oh yah. Because you see we came from Russia and we were not expelled from Russia. It isn't that we were chased out of Russia or something like that. We wanted to get out of Russia. I found that Canadian people are not interested in politics. You very seldom can contact somebody and interest him in politics. Very seldom. Of course for me politics was something that I knew the difference between Capitalism and Communism and so on so I knew the mistakes that the Communists did. They made a lot of mistakes because they were young. But I still didn't realize that Canada has a democracy. What was different in that much that in Canada the people helped to loose. You had more to say in the government in Canada. I learned more and more out of books.

PAETKAU: Did you read the papers too about, say, what MacKenzie King was doing or what the government--?

HIEBERT: Oh yes. You see MacKenzie King was the Prime Minister the time when we came to Canada. So we all worshipped MacKenzie King because he was the one that permitted us to come to Canada. There were quite a few that were against him. But we had to stay on a farm as we promised. I am glad I fulfilled my promise, my duties. I stayed five years on a farm till I had my citizenship papers. Of course later on the immigrants they

needed not just farmers they needed skilled workers too. Quite a few from Romanina, Austria or Germany came to Canada and they had right from the beginning good jobs. Nobody envied them because they were skilled workers. They knew what they were doing. They were satisfied with the wages that they were paid. Of course the factories they were doing a little bit different than the farmers. The farmers as I see it. I had $10.00 a month the first year, $35.00 a month the second year , and after that I worked for weekly wages. So what could I do I didn't know the language. I didn't know how the rules and regulations on a farmer either so I was satisfied. We never suffered. The Mennonites they helped us in different other ways yet. For instance my brother-in-law came the next year and two years later my brother came and they permitted me to take my brother in with his family into my house and they helped me along and they him a job. Then when my brother because he had asthma he couldn't work on a farm in that dust and so on, then we wanted to have something on his profession. He was a blacksmith. So I bought a little farm near Joseph's bush--10 acre farm with a shop right at the street. Close to it. So he could do any repair of implements; farm implements. He could do horseshoeing and so on, any repair work that he could lay his hands on . He was talented. He knew what he was doing. So that's what I did. I had to borrow some money to buy that farm. It wasn't worth probably $500 but they did it. I bought the farm for my brother. He lived in it. He didn't have to work on a farm of course for a the farmers. And nobody was against him till he got a job in Uniroyal, in a machine shop. Of course later on I sold the farm and I didn't lose anything. But I helped my brother because people helped me.

PAETKAU: Can you tell me a little bit about church life here in Canada during those early days?

HIEBERT: Well because I was on a farm we--there were not many people that lived in Kitchener but close to Kitchener and they gathered somewhere in Waterloo in a local Harmony Lunch. Maybe you heard about it. It's today yet. Well on top of that lunch and here in Kitchener on 40 King St. East on a second or fifth story we rented a hall and that's where we gathered on two occasions. Later on we were invited to Bethany church, Chapel St. and we were invited to the East end church here, Mennonite church. And we were invited to different churches in Baden or in New Dundee whatever it was. We wandered you know like the Gypsies, first time. But then later Waterloo, yah, we divided into two congregations. Waterloo was one and we in Kitchener had one. Just a small congregation but we knew what we were doing and why we were doing it. We still wanted to have our language in charge because we didn't understand the English so they didn't help us much. So they gathered there and they bought then that church on George Street that they have today yet. Of course they made a good buy for $2000-$3,000 with a big organ in it. And then we bought a couple years later on George St. We bought it, it was empty, it was neglected.

HIEBERT (cont'd): We got it for $4,000. And we keep that church till 1952 when we builded our church, the new church on Ottawa Street. We had 300 members when we finished there. And we have probably between 400-500 members now. It fluctuates you know, sometimes more, sometimes less. Then of course one group went away from us. They wanted to have

TAPE #38 - Interview #33 (2nd tape)

PAETKAU: You worked for them for two years you say?

HIEBERT: Yah I worked for them--I started in 1921 the fall and 1922 and 1923 and in the spring of 1924 I left for Canda. You see I just couldn't see how we could live. This tax bill showed me plain that the government in Moscow was going to press us Mennonites especially down to nothing. They want us to reduce to the poorest, weakest farmer in Russia. So we would be even below the ones that they had in their Russian villages. They wanted really to destroy us. That's what they wanted. And that's why they had this tax bill. They knew right away we wouldn't be able to fill it so they would have a real chance now to arrest the majority of these farmers and send them to jails or send them to Siberia. That's what they did. Thousands and thousands, not just Mennonites but others, were sent to Siberia. You probably read stories. Solzhenitsyn--did you ever read his--? Well it's good that you read it. I read four of his books. And he didn't tell a lie neither did he exaggerate. Everything that he told you there was true. And what our people suffered. We lost thousands and thousands of people through these concentration or labour camps. They just didn't stand it. The Russians they wanted to kill them somehow and then come and collect some more. That's why they were arrested for nothing at all. They had no reason to arrest some of the people the way they did. We saw it as it was coming to us. Not that we deserved it. But the only thing that we were against the Russians, against what they expected from us right from the Empress Catharine II. When she invited us she gave us privileges; many privileges. More than anybody else had up till then because she expected us to show the Russian farmer how to farm. And that was their objective. But she expected us Mennonites to mix in marriages, to marry the Russian girls and Russian boys; something that we didn't do. I know that that is one thing they expected us to do which we didn't. Well we couldn't. It was too much of a difference in the bringing up of the families. The majority of those peasants they didn't have even enough knifes on the table. They grabbed the meat by the fingers. Well that's something we were not used to. Then another thing is they were Greek Catholics and of course we didn't agree with that. Then their vacation level was different too because in our villages at least the last years we had enough schools for everybody, not just public schools but high schools, we had gynmasiums, business colleges and we had doctors from our Mennonites. We had drug store men--pharmacists. And we had professors in languages. We had even deaf mutes school--girl's schools, high schools and so on. In fact we were progressing so fast and so good that

HIEBERT (cont'd): the German people that visited us-- (?) Ludendorff when he came and occupied Ukraine he was surprised what he saw in these German villages. We lived a part from Germany, over 100 years and what we achieved in these hundred years he was surprised. Then another thing the language; we kept the German language strong. We had it in our houses. Yah that's something they couldn't blame on us. We tried in everything as I said. We already had pure bred horses, pure bred cows, pure bred sheep from Australia. We got everything in. We had machinery from the states, McCormick-Deerings and different binders. We were tops in everything where agriculture is concerned. And we showed it too. And the Lord blessed us too. Because we lived in we came down--there was very little except for that little river we had. Otherwise there were very few apart, very far apart. John Cornies, he was a smart Mennonite. Maybe you heard about him already. He took it in his hands and he organized it. He said, "Now listen, what we have to do to have supply of rain and so on, moisture, we must plant trees." And he organized a tree planting season every year. Trees were planted around the house, at the back of the house. At the back of a garden and then between on the streets, and alleys between the villages from one village to the other one he planted bushes. Every farmer had to set aside quarter of an acre or one-eighth of an acre whatever it was. Maybe even one half an acre. Maybe half a discerteen, something like that; an acre. Every farmer had to do that. Then you could see bush grow up, a real bush. Those bushes were tended like we tend a fruit orchard here; cultivated, hoed, cleaned, kept in order. And I tell you in a couple years the whole villages; the 59 villages that looked liked a I'm not surprised when the Tsar came in and visited those villages he saw the difference between the Russian district and the German district. He must have seen it right away. It looked like a Garden of Eden. It was. And we had supply of rain enough. We had good harvest. Hardly any drought.

PAETKAU: But now after the revolution and civil war and so on conditions were very difficult to (unintelligible).

HIEBERT: Very difficult. Our Mennonites still they tried at that time, the last couple years that I was there. I remember they tried to organize some club or some cooperative or something like that where the farmers could organize and expect something or demand something or wish something of this kind. But they were not accepted. We didn't progress very far. We even tried already at that time to have connection with Germany and import some German--but the best thing we could do was we got some tractors from America at that time. And we had good connections with America at that time. And we tried-- the Mennonites at that time--there was still quite a few Mennonites

HIEBERT (cont'd): they stayed there; Lutherans and Catholics too. When I say Mennonites I mean the German of the village. They stayed there because they expected that it would be better. "Sometimes it really will come back." But it never did. It never came back. We have immigration here from Russia. Lots of people, Mennonites and others they go to Germany now. They settle there. You probably heard about that too. Thousands of people live there in Germany and as I saw yesterday in the paper they are not only accepted there, they even get work over there. So they have future over there. That's something we didn't have in Russia. Well now maybe the Russian will think a little bit different about these Mennonites but they are still not helping. People that knew their villages and went to Russia to visit them; even my nephew was there and he said the villages they looked vacated, like destroyed and maybe 2-3 houses still stand, maybe the school is there, maybe the church is there or some other building. But as a rule the villages are destroyed. I have a brother-in-law, he is a beekeeper and he went to Russia to a beekeeper convention--Jacob Dyck. He sells honey here in the market. He told me that he went through villages that he knew because he was born there. I wasn't born in the villages. I was born on the estate. But he was born there and he knew the villages all off by heart. I didn't. I lived only 2-3 years in the villages. And he said that he was surprised when he drove through those villages most of them were group and collective farms and he said they harvested potatoes. He said he never saw such a poor crop of potatoes, maybe a big acreage there and in the centre there was a pile of potatoes; small potatoes,hardly anyone as big as a fist. Most were smaller. Well we had potatoes they were as big as two fists because the ground was producing it. We knew we would have it. And we worked it. The Russians don't; not even the collective farms where the government supplies machinery, seed. The government supplies whatever they need and still hardly any results. And the same with the grain. That's why Russia is buying wheat from Canada or from the States and so on. Russia has enough land and good land to produce enough wheat for the whole country. We were producing wheat and we were exporting wheat and we were exporting flour from the colonies alone.

PAETKAU: Do you remember the NEP programme at all?

HIEBERT: New Economic Politic. Yah you see I remember that. And that was our chance through this NEP plan we came out of Russia. Because in this NEP plan, that was a five-year plan--new five-year economic plan that Stalin organized. He wanted to make himself seen or show the people that he is for the people. Then it says that anyone that is displaced--any displaced person can move whereever he or she wants to. That was a lot already. And any person that hasn't got enough they were

HIEBERT (cont'd): supposed to be given help to start anew. Well that was a real good--but of course he gave order in the new five-year economic plan to produce so and so much in five years; to bring it up to such a level and so on. But our group they grabbed this here and said we are--we came from Holland and then to Germany and then to Russia. We are really descendants of Holland and not German. That makes a big difference already. And we applied then because we are all displaced there whether we couldn't imigrate to Canada or to the States or Mexico or whereever it was. We didn't say right away it must be Canada because we didn't know ourselves if we would be able to come to Canada at that time. So we tried different things and this really helped us. And this new plan there helped us to take this initiative in that line. Of course different other groups started something like that too later on but we Mennonites we were the first ones to immigrate. Then later on the Catholics came. The Lutherans came later on, and so on. But I think we made the start.

PAETKAU: What procedure did you have to go through to get your permission to immigrate?

HIEBERT: I tell you from 1922 or leading men, men that we picked, we voted to do the work with this they started already in 1922. We prepared lists for people that really were displaced. A couple thousand and so on. First of all they went to Kharkov. That was our district government. Then from Kharkov we had to go to Moscow. That was the top government. Now they went down and back and forth and back many times. And many times they were dangerously close to being arrested. It was the Lord that kept the hands in safety. We don't see it otherwise because other people probably couldn't have done that. We people by ourselves couldn't have done it because it was too dangerous to do something in Russia, to ask something that they were 100% against it--go and leave the country? They would never think of it. Now at this time already they saw the mistakes they did, how much damage they done to these Mennonites and they could expect that they probably would leave because they knew the Mennonites left before already. In 1855 in those years quite a few Mennonites left to America, to Canada too. So it was dangerous but step by step we came closer and closer and two years later in 1924 we had permission to ask a Canadian doctor to come here and check for health all these people that were on a list. Now we had several lists of people that really were in need of immigration, in need of being transported somewhere else. So they were working just as these lists here. They didn't talk of anything else but those people in this list the government in Moscow gave permission. So that we got that doctor from Canada he came over and checked us. And anybody that was healthy he was kept on a list and anybody that had trouble --eye sickness or something else he was postponed. He wasn't struck out but postponed. They let them go out to Germany

HIEBERT (cont'd): and kept them there or up to England and kept them there, till the eyes were healed. Then they came anyway. So that the list of 2,000 or so, and I was on the first list too. I was on the first train that went out and I was on the first ship that went out and I was on the first to come to Waterloo County.

PAETKAU: How did you get your name on the list? Did you just have to make an application?

HIEBERT: Yah. Because I was in the Soviet Office I put a list together and sent it to these men there that worked. So I put myself and my wife into that list.

PAETKAU: How was your trip out of Russia?

HIEBERT: Well, Uneventful. We had the Russian trains taking us up to Sabage to the Finland border. Up to there was a Russian train. And it was underland for me. It was slow, very slow, but we had enough food. They didn't supply anything. But we were really happy after we went through that gate there where on the top was still the hammer and sickle, and we left that behind us. As soon as we came through we were met by officials from the CPR because we got our transportation all from the CPR. Whatever it was from that gate, they took us either by train or by boat or what it was they took us. Then we already started to get their food. We were taking the first thing; we were taking a steam bath and louses you know. Well of course we were more clean than the Russians were so of course we couldn't help it either because the train or station whatever it is, whenever you go there there was lice. The Russians really were filthy in that regard. And we couldn't help it either but we tried to keep clean so that we were very happy when we got that steam bath. The clothing were all baked so we were sure we had nice clean underwear, clean wash, everything and we ourself had a steam bath. So we felt good. We went then by a small boat through the North Sea. We came there to Belgium--England? Then we got to Atlantic Ocean, ship. There again it was alright. We had good food with the two bed. With the ship it's this way. If you are in a ship, in a boat inthe center and the boat rocks, then in the center you don't feel so much. But when you are at the end of a boat either here or here that goes down and up and down and up that really is bad. And we happened to be at the end. So the first day it wasn't bad but the second day we really were sea-sick. Then of course you know how it is. My wife--we had two children at that time. One was 2 years and the other one a couple months. She wanted to have either lemons or something that would make her feel better. But we never were able to go and eat with the Captain there in the dining room. Here is something--when she sent me up to the Caffine to buy something a drink or whatever it was. We didn't have much money. I just had a couple of dollars that I cashed in for a sewing machine or something like that. That's all we had. So I bought a little.

HIEBERT (cont'd): I went up to the Caffine and stayed there for an hour, half an hour I felt good. I was ready to go to the dining room and eat but as soon as I came down I got sick again. And we were sick about 10 days, for a week at least. Then of course when we came here--yah it was very hard for us to leave Russia. More for my wife than it was for me because I wasn't in my home anyway when I was there. I went with my wife to her father's place. He had two houses so we lived in one of those houses; "neben haus" what they call it. But for her it was bad because she never was out of Alexanderkrone, not for a long time. So for her it was really harder. But we knew there was no coming back for us, so we didn't look back when we drove out of the village. We didn't look back at our house or our village. We came to the station and we didn't look back either. We just lived for that time, the present. Once in awhile--we were told that we slept there for 3-4 hours. Well then of course my wife would go out and she would wash some diapers and hang them out and dry them and so on and get ready for the next. Well it took us a couple days before we got to the border. That was just about crossing half of Russia. Then of course when we came here to the station and put in a train then we knew now we would living in a new country, new environment, new hope. We had hoped that even if we didn't bring anything along that we brought hope along. We did. We brought along hope and of course we trusted God would help us. We needed that. And we would meet people here that would be our future friends. So it wasn't hard for us to leave Russia. It was bad at that time for us to stay in Russia and it would be bad to return. So we had only one eye on Canada and I am up to there I am thankful that I am in Canada. It's the best country in the world today. Of course there is a lot that think we wish it would be different but we still think that Canada is the best country up till now.

PAETKAU: You landed in St. John's you said? And from there you went by train to...?

HIEBERT: Well from there we came to Toronto. In Toronto some people took another train out west. We were divided. But our train came then here to Waterloo and stopped at the Waterloo Erb St. church there. That's where we went out of a train.

PAETKAU: How were you divided up? Why did you come to Waterloo?

HIEBERT: Oh the people that went out West they had relatives in the West. They went with a different train. But the rest came here to Waterloo. And here in Waterloo there was absolutely no division among us. All the people here in Waterloo came to the church and all the Mennonite people already had a list here to pick some people from this group here, whether it was 1,000, 800, 100 I forgot how many there were. But they had a list and every farmer here went--we were put into the horse shed. That's where we launched there--it was a horse shed at that time but now it is gone. But the train stopped across the street from that church; Erb St. Church. We walked over

HIEBERT (cont'd): a block or too with our belongings that we had. People from here helped us. And then in the meantime the committee there from here and our committee came together and then the people --supposing all people from Dundee--that was a Moses Baer they wanted a family with two children. Well, so they told them we have a family with two children, Henry and Susan. So they went out and they asked, "Who is Henry with two children?" So we sat there and our little belongings there and they came and presented themselves as Moses and Adeline Baer from New Dundee. They were farmers and had two girls at home, 19 and 17 years old. And they wanted babies. So we were welcome there and I tell you those people welcomed us to their homes. They welcomed us to their hearts. They were real good. Even to this day, 53 years later when we have a wedding or burial or they have something they are invited and we are invited. We still have that family relationship. Of course Moses Baer died and Mrs. Baer died and my wife died. There are quite a few already buried but still whatever is left we still come together and write cards for Christmas and so on.

PAETKAU: How did they look at you or what kind of questions did they ask? You know you were immigrants and Russians.

HIEBERT: We knew about it too. We expected that. The Mennonites here they said you probably wouldn't have to be chased out of Russia if it wouldn't be for you taking the guns. See what I mean? The Selbstschutz; they were against it. They were against it. And I don't blame them. We were against it too. But I told them. I said, "It's hard to say, very hard to say now for you what you would have done if you would have been in our shoes." I says, "I doubt whether you would stay strick to your beliefs. I doubt not all would. It would be a mixture." I know they told us that plainly. But they didn't show it. But they just said that probably is the reason for it. And it didn't help us to convince them. Till one thing.

(End of tape)

Henry Hiebert
August 27, 1976

PAETKAU: You mentioned about when you lived on the estate in Russia when your father was a manager there that church was in the village, I understand. So there wasn't much opportunity to go to church.

HIEBERT: That's right. You see when we lived on that estate there were only 1, 2, 3, 4 Mennonites living on that estate. The others were all Russian. Some were married and some were singled. But as far as the church was concerned for ourself we didn't have it because we didn't have a preacher we didn't have any Sunday School, we didn't have any Bible School meetings. We had nothing. Except as far as I remember we had only one visitor. He was a preacher, I think it was Jacob Reimer from Richenau. He was a "Reisebretecha", what you call it. And he was there once, and twice we had missionary visitors. Of course for us that was a highlight. Because for us it was something new. Something that we never heard of or learned. So as I say, I grew up without Sunday School, without Bible study. And I grew up without church at all. We didn't have it there because the closest Mennonite church would be in Halbstadt I would say. And that was 75 miles away.

PAETKAU: What was the attitude toward church then? Did a lot of the people on estates not go to church because there were no churches around?

HIEBERT: Well nobody went to church, not there. Except for the families themselves they probably had, what you call it? morning devotions or maybe evening devotions. And on Sunday probably they read and had some devotion just for the family themselves. But we didn't get it. These four families they didn't get it. Each had it at home. My father he came from a colony. He came from Steinfeld. My mother came from .. Of course they had it in their villages but we here we didn't have it. So the first thing when I went to Halbstadt to go to the high school then I visited the church. Then I learned what it means--but I still didn't have Bible study in the evening or something like that.

PAETKAU: How would you compare the church life that you left in Russia to church life in Canada for instance?

Well you see, most of the people they came from villages. And the villages they all had churches . Every village, just about every village. If not then the neighbour church was there. So they had three different denominations there. Like Mennonite Brethren and General Conference and Alliance Church. That comes from "Aliance". This

HIEBERT: church was taking in people that were baptized in their church from different denominations. That's why they call it "alliance" We had the three. So when we came here to Canada then we were altogether. And of course once we organized and later on in congregations and later on in conferences here in Ontario and all over. Then of course we all followed the principle of what we had over there in Russia, as far as I know. Of course I didn't know exactly what was there but I knew that they had preachers from those times they preached here too. They brought over except maybe when they organized into conferences we organized it in a way that it would suit us here. The difference wouldn't be very much. There was hardly any difference. We tried to stay in the frame of the old church in Russia whether we were Brethren Mennonite or General Conference or Alliance (Evangelical). The armour of a

PAETKAU: One more thing that came to my mind. The depression years which came not too long after you came to Canada. How did they affect you? How did you survive them?

HIEBERT: Well I tell you it was this way. Because, I came here in 1934 and I worked on a farm until 1939. In 1930 I worked already in a machine shop. Then in 1931 the depression started and I just bearly worked one year in a factory. And because I was hired one of the last ones I was fired one of the--I mean they let me out, one of the first ones. I wanted the job. When I still was working I went home from the shop after 4:00 or 5:00 whenever it was. It was too other men, neighbours of that street where I lived they worked. The one was my foreman and one was a man that worked in a boarding mill, a machinist. Then one said to me, and the depression already it was hard on wages and income and so on, and it was hard to buy bread. I mean there was bread but people if they didn't work they didn't have money. And there was no unemployment insurance at that time. If you are laid off you are on your own. It's the same with hospital or doctor bills or whatever it was, dentist bills, or whatever it was you had to pay. And if there was no money that was bad. So one fellow asked me, "How come you are still singing and whistling in this depression?" Well I said, "I tell you what, in times like this, we had it in Russia yet too and it was worse than that. You know the famine in 1921-22." I said, "I was married, not even a year or maybe about a year and that famine set in, no work, no money, no income but my wife was expecting. I knew she had to eat better than what we were eating no so I told her. 'You know what? What good are our wedding bells?' Golden wedding bells, you know--if we haven't got to eat. I said, "I will take these wedding bells and maybe you have a curtain or pillow case or something like that you can spare and I will go to Melitopol, that was 40 miles. I will go sell it, barter for grain, maybe rye, maybe

wheat, whatever it is. I didn't expect flowers. You know I could grind it myself. Even if it was in a coffee mill. But I didn't want to spent any grain. So I went and she gave me four potatoes, boiled in skin. So I could eat two potatoes on the way down, 40 miles and then two potatoes on the way back. A little bit salt. That's what I did. So there was about 3 or 4 of us. I didn't want to go alone because going alone with some grain on your shoulder. They could attack you and rob you. So we went out and I sold it for 1 bushel of mixed grain, like rye and wheat. So I took that bag, tied it on the top and tyed it in the center and threw it over my shoulder and then I walked 40 miles back. I walked 40 miles this one bushel of grain on my shoulder. Of course I ate the two potatoes first with salt. And I came home and on the way back I stopped at a windmill at the neighbour village there and I had it ground and I gave a couple pounds of that grain for grinding it. Then we didn't use that flour for baking bread. That was too expensive. We always made pancake or something like that from it. That's how we came through it. But the people here when I told them that story they said, "What, 40 miles down and 40 miles back!" Then he said to the fellow, to my foreman he says, "George, then I can go to the store for 5¢ I can buy a loaf of bread. That I've 5¢." So that's what he told. "Henry, then you have a lot ahead of us." Well I says the way we live in here I still believe that it's nice and it's good. We don't have to worry a bit. We have the bread and everything right in the stores. Not every time we have money for it but if we haven't got money we don't buy it. We will do without then. And we did a lot. Then later on what could I do? Where could I earn? I went to a baker. He was a home baker. Not Henderson Bakery in Waterloo but somebody else there. And I asked for a job. And he says, "Well I can give you a job splitting wood." Because he was heating his ovens with wood. "I can give you a job cutting wood." Cord wood you know and splitting it and making it ready you know. So I worked for a week. And every day he gave me stale bread that the baker didn't sell. Half a bag or a bag of stale bread. So that was plenty for me. I didn't need money. But here was something. I needed some money for sugar or something like that; salt or whatever it was. So I went and I bought an old car. I don't know what it was $10,$15. I took it apart and then I made two trailers. The real wheel with the transmission and the front wheels you know, for just boxed wheels. I had enough friends that would give me enough money to buy wood you know. A couple boards and this a bolts and so on. And I had something to do and I sold it. And I had some money made. Then one day the one fellow from the States came to the garage not far from us and he looked for a generator on his car that was burnt it. And now he had to buy a new one and he didn't spent that much money. He didn't want

HIEBERT: to go to the garage for that. This garage didn't have it. But that garage fellow pointed to my property. You know I lived not far from it. He says, "Maybe he can help you." And I happened to have an old car for the same purpose I buy an old car for $5 or $10. I happened to have the same car as he had. The same year and everything. He says, "How about a generator?" And I says, "I have one." So I sold him that generator and I was ready to go with the bicycle and buy some groceries that day. And I didn't have the money. And here the Lord sent me a man from the States and he bought the generator. I don't know did I sell it for $5-$6.00. At least I had enough money to buy sugar and lard and whatever I needed most and he went on again. That's how it was. It wasn't easy but we were not complaining. We were not complaining because it was still much much better than it was in Russia.

PAETKAU: And you managed to survive.

HIEBERT: Yah. There was a chance to survive .

PAETKAU: I thoroughly enjoyed my two visits with Mr. Hiebert. He's a very friendly, aimiable man. Very interested in sharing his experiences. As he indicated to me in other conversation he's shared his experiences with other people whom he has met. His doctors for example and so on. And so these experiences are very alive and real in his mind. Hence he is quite good at relating them, up to some very helpful and interesting details. It was obvious that he enjoyed telling me his experiences. They were extremely interesting because of the many varied experiences that he has had particularly in Russia, serving and working in so many varied capacities. His recollection of these incidents was clear and good. The book to which he refers in the first part of the interview is entitled, "Recollections of My Life in Russia." A microfilm copy of this short manuscript is on deposit in the archives at Conrad Grebel College. Unfortunately whether it was because it was Friday the 13th I don't know, but the tape got stuck on side B of Tape #38 during my first intereview with Mr. Hiebert and so being unaware of this we talked for half an hour till I realized the tape hadn't been going and I had missed the portion of the interview during with his experiences in Canada. He had just been telling me about he had explained to the farmer for whom he was working the position of the Selbstschutz and the reasons for the circumstances surrounding it in Russia and how this farmer had finally understood his position and how this was possible. As I say, it was unfortunate that this happened. It was the only time it did happen throughout the whole series of interviews. I felt that it was worth returning to Mr. Hiebert a second time and having him relay again his experiences to me and what is contained in the second part of the inter-

view is primarily and essentially the same material that he related to me earlier with a few details added and different but I felt it was worth getting anyway. He is a very good and excellent resource on Russia particularly because there was many varied experiences. And he said the years from 1920-21 for example, those famine years there was enough material there for a book by itself. So that Mr. Hiebert is a very good resource with a very clear mind, a good memory and very willing to share his experiences . Very willing to talk and very helpful in terms of relating his experiences which are, as I said, so diverse and so interesting in forming a picture of what happened to our Mennonites in Russia during the war and revolutionary years.