

# Intersections

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Compiled by Alain Epp Weaver

## MCC and National Socialism

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MCC and National Socialism: the title of this issue of *Intersections* is undeniably jarring. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches that seeks to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice—such a mission is diametrically opposed to the racist, genocidal program of Nazism. Yet, as recent scholarship has highlighted with renewed focus, MCC's humanitarian efforts from the late 1920s through the mid-1950s to help Mennonites from the Soviet Union migrate to the Americas were entangled with National Socialism and its legacy in multiple, complex ways. What were these entanglements? What are we to make of them?

Committed to a transparent and non-defensive examination of its past, MCC approached twelve

historians from Canada, the United States, Germany, France and the Netherlands to build on their previous studies and to conduct additional research in MCC's archives (which have been and continue to be open to researchers) to help us better understand MCC's connection to the broader Mennonite story of entanglement and even complicity and collaboration with National Socialism. In this issue of *Intersections*, these historians present summaries of their research. Expanded versions of many of these investigations will appear over the next couple years in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* and *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Some authors will also present their findings this fall at two MCC-sponsored academic events organized by the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg: the “MCC at 100” conference (September 30-October 2) and a roundtable on “MCC, Refugees and the Legacies



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**Conference: MCC at 100: Mennonites, Service and the Humanitarian Impulse.**

A virtual Mennonite Studies Conference at the University of Winnipeg, sponsored by MCC, Sept. 30–Oct. 2, 2021. Presentations at the conference will examine multiple dimensions of MCC’s one hundred year history, including papers by John Eicher, Ben Goossen and Erika Weidemann on different aspects of MCC’s entanglement with National Socialism. More information and free registration via this [link](#).

**Roundtable: MCC, Refugees, and National Socialism.**

A virtual learning event organized by the University of Winnipeg and sponsored by MCC, with presentations from Aileen Friesen, Ben Goossen, Steve Schroeder and Erika Weidemann and a response from Anna Holian. November 4, 2021. Find more information and register for this free event [here](#).

of National Socialism” (November 4). Both events are open to the public. See the “Learn More” sidebar for links to more information about and free registration for these online events.

The articles below explore different ways that MCC’s humanitarian work intersected with National Socialism and its legacy, from the late 1920s, when MCC’s first efforts to resettle Soviet Mennonites in Paraguay began, to the mid-1950s, when MCC’s post-war resettlement work with Soviet Mennonites concluded. Individual articles name and examine multiple forms of MCC entanglement with National Socialism and its legacy:

- MCC’s financial debt to the German government for the transportation of Soviet Mennonites to Paraguay in 1930 meant that it became a debtor to the Nazi regime once the Nazis assumed power in 1933. Over the ensuing years, MCC relied on Benjamin Unruh, a committed Nazi, to represent it in negotiations with the Nazi government regarding that debt.
- During the 1930s and through the Second World War, MCC monitored growing pro-Nazi sentiment in Paraguay’s Fernheim colony that it had helped establish and that it continued to aid. Wary of the growing German nationalist sentiment within the colony, MCC endeavored to support and cultivate commitment to nonresistance among Fernheim’s colonists, while also treading lightly about interfering in internal colony matters. However, when conflict within Fernheim between the *völkische* (German nationalist) and *wehrlose* (unarmed, or nonresistant) factions came to a head in 1944, MCC, under pressure from the U.S. government, in turn pressured colony leadership to expel the *völkische* leaders.
- In its relief operations in war-time France, MCC workers witnessed Nazi genocidal policies in action, with the round-up of Jews to be sent to death camps. MCC shifted its work from solely humanitarian relief to also include efforts, led by Lois Gunden, to rescue Jewish children from the horrific fate that awaited them.
- Alongside its large humanitarian relief program in Europe following the Second World War, MCC also mobilized to help resettle displaced Mennonites, especially from the Soviet Union, efforts that would continue for nearly a decade. Initially, MCC’s resettlement initiatives took place under the threat of Mennonites being sent back to a very uncertain future in the Soviet Union, lending extreme urgency to the work.

These displaced Mennonites had strikes against them from the perspective of international refugee bodies—they had accepted German citizenship and the majority of eligible men (and some women) had collaborated with the Nazis in some capacity, from serving in the regular army to working in more specialized units such as the *Waffen-SS*. Operating in a complex post-war environment, MCC workers succeeded in persuading Allied government and inter-governmental bodies that Mennonites should nevertheless be allowed to migrate to Canada and South America. MCC staff tested and deployed different narratives about Mennonite “nationality” and their actions during the war, argued that Mennonites had accepted German citizenship under duress and downplayed and covered over Mennonite participation in Nazi military bodies. The outcome of this nearly decade-long humanitarian effort by MCC was the successful resettlement of around 12,000 Mennonites from the Soviet Union in the Americas (especially Canada and Paraguay). Yet, as several articles in this issue make clear, these humanitarian efforts were complicated and deeply ambiguous initiatives. Part of MCC’s post-war efforts involved

resettling Mennonites who had collaborated with and benefited from Nazism in a variety of ways, including in some cases the commission of war crimes and participation in the Holocaust.

In the years following the Second World War, MCC helped to propagate a narrative that became part of wider Anabaptist self-understanding in Canada, the United States and beyond, a narrative of the dramatic and providential escape of desperate Mennonites in post-war Europe from the threat of deportation back to the Soviet Union and the exodus-like passage of these Mennonites through a Red Sea of danger to the promised lands of the Americas. While grounded in real events and experiences, this narrative simplified a much more complex reality, and contributed to myths of Mennonite innocence of collaboration with Nazism and complicity in the Holocaust. The articles in this issue of *Intersections* represent attempts to tell this history in a fuller, more nuanced way—and to stimulate critical conversations among Anabaptists today about this history.

We acknowledge that for some readers the events discussed over the following pages are deeply personal and possibly painful, related to family histories of displacement, migration and post-war service. We invite all to read through this issue carefully, observing the complexities, nuances and ambiguities of this history. Prayerful discernment will be essential as MCC determines next steps in light of the fuller historical account presented here. As part of this discernment, MCC welcomes the counsel of Anabaptists and others. Through the end of March 2022, you are invited to share your thoughts, advice and questions about this issue of *Intersections* and about how MCC should respond to the entanglement of MCC's humanitarian efforts before, during and after World War II with Nazism and its legacy—write to [intersections@mcc.org](mailto:intersections@mcc.org).

As MCC embarks on assessing how to learn from and respond to this history, at least one thing is clear: MCC firmly opposes antisemitism alongside all forms of racism. MCC commits itself to continued examination of its history and to discerning how to respond to this history in ways that are faithful to its grounding in the gospel of reconciliation.

*Rick Cober Bauman and Ann Graber Hershberger are MCC Canada and MCC U.S. executive directors, respectively. Alain Epp Weaver is MCC strategic planning director.*


## MCC and Nazism, 1929–1955

National Socialism played an important—and until recently little understood—role in the humanitarianism of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) during the organization's early years. Starting in 1929, the German government helped to bankroll MCC activities in Latin America, with the unanticipated result that after Hitler's accession to power in 1933, MCC owed the Third Reich a substantial monetary debt. Although U.S.-based MCC leaders were not pro-Nazi, many of their contacts in Germany and Latin America were. These fascist Mennonites helped push MCC to deepen its activities in the Third Reich. After the start of World War II, MCC began a relief program in Nazi-occupied Europe. Agency leaders learned about Nazi interest in resettling tens of thousands of Mennonites to Germany and contemplated aiding these plans. The United States' entry into the war in 1941, however, meant the end of MCC's work in the Third Reich.



Displaced Mennonite girl from the Soviet Union prepares to embark a ship in Bremerhaven in 1947. She was one of over 12,000 Soviet Mennonites who immigrated to the Americas with MCC assistance following the Second World War. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

*For many of the historical photos included in this issue, MCC does not have the names of the refugees and migrants featured.*

 **The outbreak of World War II exacerbated MCC's concerns about the Nazi movement among Mennonite settlers in Brazil and Paraguay. Many of these colonists came to believe that Hitler's expansionism would allow their return to Europe."**

MCC workers returned to Germany after Hitler's fall in 1945. Over the following decade, the organization undertook a massive humanitarian relief program among non-Mennonite Europeans while also helping nearly 15,000 Mennonite refugees relocate to the Americas. Virtually all these migrants had received privileged treatment from Hitler's genocidal state, and some had participated directly in the Holocaust of European Jews. MCC administrators learned these facts, yet they consistently downplayed them in public statements and during dealings with United Nations-affiliated refugee officials. Denial of Mennonite collaboration with Nazism at first helped to save refugees from deportation to the USSR. But beginning in 1947, this strategy mostly served to keep UN monies flowing into MCC coffers to support its work with Mennonite migrants and to protect the reputation of Mennonites. Over the ensuing years, MCC promoted a heroic narrative about the dramatic and providential rescue of desperate Mennonite refugees after World War II. These accounts contributed to suppressing sustained inquiry into Mennonite-Nazi collaboration until recent years.

New research conducted in Mennonite Central Committee's archives has helped to make possible for the first time a complete overview of the organization's entanglements with Nazism. MCC's present-day commitment to understanding this complex history, as exemplified by the publication of this special issue of *Intersections*, promises to strengthen its ongoing mission as a humanitarian organization engaged in peacebuilding around the world. By inviting scholars to examine files at MCC office in Akron, Pennsylvania, and encouraging public discussion of their findings, the agency has shown an admirable dedication to transparency. This first step of interpretation begins a new path for MCC and us, its supporters, toward collective response.

### **MCC and the Third Reich**

MCC was founded in the United States in 1920 to provide humanitarian assistance to the approximately 100,000 Mennonites in Russia suffering from famine in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution and Civil War. Between 1923 and 1927, 20,000 Mennonites migrated from the Soviet Union to Canada. Renewed hardships in the USSR at the end of the decade led to a new exodus of Mennonites. In 1929, the government of Germany brokered admission of nearly 4,000 Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union to transit camps in the Weimar Republic. MCC helped move most of these migrants—along with several subsequent transports from northern China—to Brazil and Paraguay. A subset settled in Canada with assistance from the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC). Germany issued loans to finance intercontinental transportation to Latin America along with sundry other costs. Although technically the migrants themselves owed this travel debt to the German government, MCC and CMBC guaranteed the payments. These agencies agreed to pay interest starting in 1935 and to fully repay the debt by 1940.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Verpflichtungserklärung," July 5, 1930, R 127514, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Berlin, Germany (hereafter PA AA).



Thus, when Hitler came to power in 1933, the money MCC and CMBC had owed to the Weimar Republic was now due to the Third Reich. At the time of expected payment, this debt was worth the equivalent of more than \$385,000 (over \$7.5 million today, adjusted for inflation). [All dollar costs in this article are in US\$.] With the Great Depression underway, however, neither MCC, CMBC, nor the refugees they had resettled were able to assemble this sum. Agency leaders sought influential Mennonites in Germany who could represent their interests to the Third Reich. Working with fascist Mennonites appealed to MCC leaders, since people with Nazi Party connections offered useful clout. For example, MCC officials approached one person named Walter Quiring, whom they identified as having “considerable influence” in Germany. Although Quiring was a “rabid Nazi,” they felt this posed “no reason not to use him judiciously to help in this difficult situation.”<sup>2</sup>



MCC leaders in Europe in 1945 or 1946. L to r: H.A. Fast, Robert Kreider, Atlee Beechy, Orie Miller, C.F. Klassen, Harold S. Bender, Peter Dyck, Irvin Horst. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

MCC’s most valuable contact in the Third Reich turned out to be a Mennonite professor and humanitarian named Benjamin Unruh. As an émigré from the Soviet Union, Unruh had represented the interests of Mennonite refugees from the USSR to German state officials since the 1920s. Unruh was a Nazi sympathizer, who beginning in 1933 had contributed financially to the Nazi *Schutzstaffel* (SS).<sup>3</sup> Following a 1936 Mennonite World Conference gathering in the Netherlands, MCC and CMBC empowered him to represent them in the debt matter to Nazi authorities. By mobilizing contacts in Berlin and depicting Mennonites worldwide as potential supporters of fascism, Unruh convinced the Third Reich to reduce the interest accruing on the aid agencies’ debt and to postpone repayment of the principal until 1942.<sup>4</sup> Since Canada and the U.S. entered World War II before this date, however, the money was never repaid.

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Bender to Orie Miller, June 28, 1938, IX-06-03, box 2, folder 1/117, Mennonite Central Committee Archives, Akron, Pennsylvania, USA (hereafter MCCA).

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Unruh to Walther Kolrep, January 30, 1940, Benjamin H. Unruh Papers, box 2, folder: Misc. Unruh Papers, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas, USA.

<sup>4</sup> See Benjamin Unruh, “Memorandum zum Reichsdarlehen,” 1938, R 127518, PA AA.

**“ Internal documents show that MCC administrators [in post-war Europe] knew much more about Mennonite-Nazi collaboration than they admitted publicly.”**

In the meantime, MCC had also become embroiled in a second tug-of-war with National Socialism. This other issue involved the thousands of Mennonite refugees settled in Brazil and Paraguay with joint help from MCC and Germany. These migrants were grateful to both sets of benefactors, and many developed strong pro-Nazi attitudes. Hitler's government actively cultivated relationships with German speakers abroad, and a variety of Nazi organizations distributed aid to Mennonites in Brazil and Paraguay during the 1930s. MCC officials were at best ambivalent toward such assistance but did not want to antagonize Germany or to alienate their pro-Nazi coreligionists in Latin America. In the words of one administrator, MCC at first tried to support the colonists “without asserting undue pressure against the Nazi element.”<sup>5</sup>

The outbreak of World War II exacerbated MCC's concerns about the Nazi movement among Mennonite settlers in Brazil and Paraguay. Many of these colonists came to believe that Hitler's expansionism would allow their return to Europe. The Nazi concept of *Lebensraum* (“living space”) held that the German race needed territory in Eastern Europe to grow and thrive. Hitler intended to expropriate property from Jews and Slavs and to settle German speakers from around the world on stolen land. Benjamin Unruh—MCC's main contact in Germany—enthusiastically advocated for Mennonites' inclusion in this violent scheme. According to one MCC agent in Paraguay, the single most important factor in the recent upswing of Nazism among the settlers in that country was “*Unruh's evident pro-Nazism* and his encouragement for the colonists to return to Germany or to German possessions.” Local Mennonites held “great confidence in this man.”<sup>6</sup>

MCC leaders had little interest in sponsoring a global Mennonite migration to the Third Reich, but in the early years of the war, they wanted to keep their options open. With the U.S. remaining neutral and the military course of the conflict appearing to favor Hitler's war aims, it seemed that Germany would be one of the most important countries for MCC's international aid efforts after the war. The agency chose to increase its presence in Nazi Germany in 1939. A Goshen College professor named M.C. Lehman traveled to the Third Reich as MCC's Relief Commissioner to Europe. Lehman coordinated with other MCC workers in Europe, including MCC staff in Vichy France who courageously assisted Jews facing fascist persecution. Lehman worked most closely, however, with Benjamin Unruh and other Mennonites in Germany to distribute humanitarian aid in Nazi-occupied Poland and France. Lehman's task was to win Nazi officials' favor for MCC while also maintaining a more politically neutral stance than Unruh.

While in Germany, Lehman became intimately acquainted with Nazi objectives to conquer *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe, and he kept the door open wide for MCC to help populate this territory with Mennonites. “Should Germany acquire enough space,” Lehman learned from Unruh, “many ethnic Germans will come from the East and overseas. Many Mennonites will accept the invitation.” Unruh anticipated that Hitler would provide a permanent homeland for all Mennonites in or previously from the Soviet Union, and

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<sup>5</sup> Harold Bender to Orie Miller, May 16, 1944, IX-06-03, box 22, folder 12/4, MCCA.

<sup>6</sup> S.C. Yoder, “Account of Trip to the Mennonites in the Chaco,” 1940, IX-05-01, box 1, folder 1/10, MCCA. Emphasis in original.

he expected that “MCC could not have anything against this.”<sup>7</sup> In 1941, Hitler’s forces invaded the Soviet Union, bringing 35,000 Mennonites in Ukraine under German rule. “That a very larger part of our future work,” Lehman reported to MCC colleagues, “will be in the way of help for these Mennonites in different parts of Russia and of help in getting them resettled and established is already quite clear.”<sup>8</sup>

MCC’s collaboration with the Third Reich ended in December 1941 when Germany declared war on the United States, following Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor. German authorities interned M.C. Lehman as a U.S. citizen, and in May 1942, he repatriated to his home country. During the five months of his internment in Germany, however, Lehman (lodged comfortably in a hotel along with U.S. diplomats) continued to correspond with Unruh and other German Mennonites. In his letters, he expressed hope that the war would soon be over and that he would expand his work in Hitler’s Germany. “As soon as practicable I want to return,” Lehman wrote. “The M.C.C. should begin plans now for a large relief program as soon as war restrictions are relaxed.”<sup>9</sup> Three years later, MCC would return to Germany, but not to the Third Reich.

### Post-war refugee operations

MCC’s experience in Nazi Germany, alongside peace-oriented programming closer to home, provided a basis for renewed humanitarianism in post-war Europe. Between 1942 and early 1945, the organization had devoted most of its energies to organizing alternative service programs for conscientious objectors in the United States. Looking forward to the end of the war, however, MCC established a Mennonite Aid Section in 1944. While this department’s initial purpose was to help rehabilitate young men returning from Civilian Public Service assignments, organizers also envisioned that it might soon be repurposed to help “a considerable number of European Mennonites who have been uprooted by the present world disturbance.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Aid Section would go on to coordinate MCC’s work with more than 15,000 refugees (nearly all of them Mennonites) from the former Free City of Danzig, conquered Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union.

Over a month before the Third Reich surrendered unconditionally in May 1945, MCC leaders began planning the organization’s return to Germany. They charged M.C. Lehman with authoring a document called “The MCC’s Program of Relief for Europe,” intended to help train relief workers who would then travel overseas.<sup>11</sup> Lehman’s manuscript asserted that helping war sufferers, including Mennonites, constituted a worthy objective for Christian



Jakob Ediger, photo from an internal MCC questionnaire, 1949. According to Ediger’s 1944 German naturalization file, he had joined an *Einsatzgruppe* death squad in Nazi-occupied Ukraine in 1941; after this killing squad moved on from the area around the Chortitza colony, Ediger continued to work for the Nazi *Sicherheitspolizei* (SiPo) and *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) in Zaporizhzhia until evacuating westward in 1943. He kept working for the SiPo and SD upon arrival in Nazi-occupied Poland. MCC employed Ediger in the office of its refugee camp in Backnang, Germany. (MCC photo)

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Unruh to M.C. Lehman, April 18, 1940, IX-19-01, box 4, folder 3/25, MCCA.

<sup>8</sup> M.C. Lehman, “Report on German-Poland Project of Mennonite Central Committee,” October 14, 1941, IX-06-03, box 5, folder 3/67, MCCA.

<sup>9</sup> M.C. Lehman, “Lisbon, Portugal,” May 18, 1942, IX-06-03, box 5, folder 3/67, MCCA.

<sup>10</sup> John Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and Its Service, 1920–1951* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1952), 179.

<sup>11</sup> Orié Miller to Irvin Horst and John Bender, March 29, 1945, IX-12-01, box 22, folder 12, MCCA.

pacifists. He added: “The political beliefs and practices of needy people will be no concern of ours as relief workers except in so far as they may be contrary to Christian ethics.”<sup>12</sup> That is, MCC had already committed to helping Mennonites in Germany before assessing what opinions they might have held toward National Socialism or investigating what roles they had played in the war. Lehman himself was among the first wave of MCC workers from the U.S. and Canada sent to Europe in mid-1945.

MCC humanitarians in Europe quickly determined that the Mennonites most in need of their attention were refugees from Soviet Ukraine who had retreated westward with Nazi forces starting in 1943. The Third Reich had considered these German speakers to be racial Aryans and had provided most of them with the spoils of genocidal warfare, including clothes, goods and housing taken from Jews or other murder victims. Nonetheless, the war years had hardly been easy for these Mennonites, and now they faced the prospect of being forcibly returned to the USSR, where they would be treated as traitors. In fact, only 12,000—less than half—escaped this fate. MCC staff worked tirelessly from late 1945 through 1946 to track down Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union and to bring them to regions administered by the Western Allies.



Children at a refugee camp at Lohfelden near Kassel, Germany, pose in 1948 with grain sacks from different international aid agencies. In addition to MCC (on the right) are CARE (Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe) and CRALOG (Council of Relief Agencies Licensed to Operate in Germany). (MCC photo)

The objectives of MCC’s refugee operations changed substantially in 1947. In this year, the governments of Britain, France and the United States turned against Joseph Stalin’s program to seize former Soviet citizens from across Europe, including zones of Western control. Most refugees under MCC care were therefore no longer in danger of ending up in Siberian labor camps. They were nevertheless homeless and destitute in a defeated land that was still years away from economic recovery. MCC resolved to help move as many of these refugees to the Americas as possible. The first migrant ships went to Paraguay. A small number of refugees made it to the United States. More than half ultimately relocated to Canada. Beyond those from what is now Ukraine, MCC also moved thousands of refugees from Danzig, Germany and Poland.

To facilitate this transatlantic migration, MCC publicly and systematically downplayed the collaboration of tens of thousands of European Mennonites with National Socialism. Concretely, the agency desired to establish the eligibility of Mennonite refugees with United Nations-affiliated refugee organizations. UN rules stipulated that such organizations could not provide aid to “Persons of German ethnic origin” who had fled into Germany “to avoid falling into the hands of Allied armies.”<sup>13</sup> MCC workers calculated that if this standard were consistently applied to Mennonite migrants from the Soviet Union, “95 per cent” would be deemed ineligible.<sup>14</sup> To ensure mass eligibility, MCC made three principal claims to UN officials. First, MCC insisted that most of the refugees were not Germans but members of a distinct Mennonite ethnicity. Second, it alleged that the migrants had been persecuted in the USSR like the Jews under Hitler. And third, it claimed they “were

<sup>12</sup> M.C. Lehman, “Mennonite Relief for Europe,” 1945, IX-12-01, box 22, folder 12, MCCA.

<sup>13</sup> “Constitution of the International Refugee Organization,” in *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America, 1776-1949*, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970), 300.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Dyck to M.R. Thomas, January 20, 1949, IX-19-9, box 2, folder 1/74, MCCA.



brutally treated by the German occupation authorities” and thus “did not receive favored treatment.”<sup>15</sup>

Denying widespread Nazi collaboration by Mennonites was financially beneficial for MCC’s efforts to resettle migrants whom the organization presented as long-suffering displaced persons. “Establishing the eligibility of our Mennonite refugees for international assistance,” administrators assessed, “was the most significant development of 1947, because on this question depended the measure of outside financial assistance that would be given our program.”<sup>16</sup> UN agencies provided the equivalent of \$160,000 (\$2 million today) for MCC’s first shipload of refugees, and they continued financing transatlantic travel after that. The UN groups also paid for food rations and rail travel within Europe. At MCC’s flagship refugee camp in Gronau, Germany, this assistance totaled \$20,000 per month for food (\$220,000 today) and \$9,000 per month for train tickets (\$100,000 today).<sup>17</sup> The UN cash flow substantially eased MCC budgeting. Mennonite churches in the U.S. and Canada gave generously for refugee work, but even in the bumper year of 1947, donations for this MCC program came to \$600,000 (\$7 million today), making the UN contributions essential for MCC’s Mennonite refugee resettlement program.<sup>18</sup>

Internal documents show that MCC administrators knew much more about Mennonite-Nazi collaboration than they admitted publicly. As early as 1946, the agency determined that “all of our people” left Ukraine “not so much as forced labor but as members of the greater Germanic family. None of them will truthfully speak of persecution by the Germans.”<sup>19</sup> Mennonites received far more UN funding than other groups that had held privileged ethnic German (*Volksdeutsche*) status during World War II. Yet as one MCC worker wrote, “I am never going to say that Mennonites are not guilty and are free from Nazis any more than other *Volksdeutsche* in Russia.”<sup>20</sup> MCC kept a studied distance from individuals like Benjamin Unruh who had been particularly tainted by Nazi pasts. But it continued to work closely with them in informal or semi-official capacities. MCC partnered with or directly hired multiple former Nazi officials and even SS agents because of the expertise they had built promoting fascist schemes to resettle Mennonites during World War II.<sup>21</sup>



Heinrich Hamm (right), office manager of the large MCC refugee camp at Gronau, Germany, greets two former Mennonite soldiers who had served in Hitler’s armed forces, and who had recently been freed from internment in Allied camps as prisoners of war. Hamm had been a collaborator with Nazi forces during the wartime German occupation of the western Soviet Union. Upon moving to the Baltic town of Stutthof in 1944 after evacuating from Soviet Ukraine, he helped to administer a Mennonite-owned munitions factory that used hundreds of enslaved laborers from a nearby concentration camp. Following the war, MCC employed Hamm as the deputy leader of the Gronau camp from mid-1947 through early 1948, at which time he moved to the Fallingbostal MCC camp. Hamm organized an MCC catalogue of all known Mennonite refugees in western Europe, and he directed the organization’s efforts to free Mennonite POWs interned in British, French, U.S. and Soviet camps, releasing them into MCC’s care. He immigrated with his wife to Canada in mid-1948. (Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada)

<sup>15</sup> C.F. Klassen, “Statement Concerning Mennonite Refugees,” July 19, 1948, AJ/43/572, folder: Political Dissidents – Mennonites, Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France.

<sup>16</sup> William Snyder, “Report of the Mennonite Aid Section Director,” January 8, 1948, IX-06-03, box 66, folder 36/124, MCCA.

<sup>17</sup> Siegfried Janzen to William Snyder, December 7, 1948, IX-19-16, box 27, folder 15/23, MCCA.

<sup>18</sup> William Snyder, “Mennonite Refugees,” 1948, IX-12-01, box 22, folder 35, MCCA.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Dyck to William Snyder, October 30, 1946, IX-06-03, box 50, folder 27/81, MCCA.

<sup>20</sup> Johan N. Van den Berg, November 1947, IX-19-9, box 2, folder 1/59, MCCA.

<sup>21</sup> MCC’s activities in post-war Europe relied on cooperation with individuals who had collaborated with the Third Reich in a variety of

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Revelations about the wartime activities of Mennonite migrants substantially hindered MCC’s refugee program only during its final stages. In July 1949, the UN briefly suspended Mennonite eligibility after one officer checked statements by dozens of migrants against Nazi-era records in Berlin. This inquiry showed that refugees under MCC care included former *Wehrmacht* soldiers, occupation officials, policemen, *Waffen-SS* members, employees of the Security Service and *Einsatzgruppe* killers.<sup>22</sup> One MCC worker, Peter Dyck, expressed doubts about the representativeness of this list. He picked another 147 names at random and quietly submitted them to the Berlin archives. The results were much the same. Dyck kept this information secret. “Akron has not received any of it,” he told a confidant, “and I see no need for submitting the findings to them at this time.”<sup>23</sup> Dyck and his colleagues lobbied UN-affiliated agencies to again treat Mennonites as eligible in principle, achieving this objective several months later.

By 1950, MCC’s transatlantic refugee program reoriented toward helping “hard core” Mennonite cases: migrants with known medical disabilities, Nazi Party membership or SS affiliation. MCC had already moved more than 11,000 refugees from Soviet Ukraine overseas by this time, leaving only 1,000 in Western Europe. Newly rigorous background checks showed that at least 140 of those remaining had served with the *Waffen-SS*, rendering them ineligible for UN aid.<sup>24</sup> Also ineligible were Mennonites from the Danzig area, “most” of whom reportedly had Nazi Party connections.<sup>25</sup> MCC nonetheless worked to help all aspiring migrants from these groups relocate to Canada, even though the UN would not finance their transportation. Mennonite church leaders in Canada appealed to Ottawa to

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ways. At an early stage, MCC sought contacts, assistance and documents from men such as Benjamin Unruh and John Kroeker, both of whom had been on the SS payroll. MCC staff worked especially closely with so-called *Vertrauensmänner*, or representatives, from Germany’s local Mennonite community as well as from the refugee population from Eastern Europe. The most important of these *Vertrauensmänner* included Ernst Crous, who had helped place Nazi propaganda in the German Mennonite press; Gerhard Fast, who had served as a so-called racial expert with the East Ministry in Nazi-occupied Ukraine; and Heinrich Wiebe, who had served as the mayor of the large city of Zaporizhzhia during the Holocaust. MCC also employed Mennonite migrants in various capacities at its camps. The *Einsatzgruppe* veteran Jakob Ediger, for instance, worked in the office of MCC’s Backnang refugee facility. Heinrich Hamm, who had helped run a factory with slave labor from the Stutthof concentration camp during World War II, served as the deputy director of MCC’s Gronau camp in 1947 and 1948. For more on Hamm, see Benjamin Goossen, “How to Catch a Mennonite Nazi,” *Anabaptist Historians* (October 29, 2020), available at <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2020/10/29/how-to-catch-a-mennonite-nazi/>.

<sup>22</sup> “Selected Mennonite Cases,” 1949, IX-19-9, box 2, folder 1/78, MCCA.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Dyck to C.F. Klassen, March 11, 1949, IX-19-9, box 2, folder 1/74, MCCA.

<sup>24</sup> Executive Committee, “Minutes,” January 14, 1950, IX-05-01, box 2, folder 2/18, MCCA.

<sup>25</sup> J.J. Thiessen, “Bericht des Vorsitzenden der Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization für die erweiterte Boardsitzung,” March 1, 1951, IX-19-9, box 3, folder 2/21, MCCA.

allow entry for Mennonites who had been Nazi Party members or *Waffen-SS* soldiers.<sup>26</sup> Canada's government eventually lifted restrictions of this nature, enabling MCC by 1955 to finish moving virtually all Mennonites who still desired to leave Europe.

## Conclusion

Until now, MCC has not publicly grappled with the ways its humanitarian work with Mennonites from Europe before, during and after the Second World War was entangled with Nazism and its legacy. Information contained in this special issue of *Intersections* will likely be new to most readers. As MCC wrapped up its European resettlement work, the organization tenaciously sought to shape historical accounts of these efforts. MCC leadership fought in the early 1950s, for instance, to censor the official history of the United Nations' overall European refugee program. Staff objected to claims in the initial draft "that the Russian Mennonites were not eligible for the help they received," and that displaced Mennonites "concealed evidence on the instruction of MCC representatives."<sup>27</sup> MCC's own files show these accusations to be unquestionably true. Yet MCC successfully enlisted allies at the U.S. State Department to insist that the manuscript be revised to ensure that MCC "receive better treatment."<sup>28</sup> Over the following decades, MCC continued to advance narratives about the providential salvation of persecuted refugees from the Soviet Union, further covering over the complex, multifaceted ways these and other Mennonites had collaborated with or benefited from Nazism.

As MCC confronts this past, addressing the legacies of institutional antisemitism should be a priority. Central MCC leaders were not pro-Nazi. Yet MCC willingly partnered with ardent National Socialists in the 1930s and early 1940s to enlist the Third Reich's assistance for its international Mennonite relief efforts. Prior to the U.S.'s entry into the war, MCC considered what resettlement efforts for Mennonites might look like in the event of successful German conquest of territory on its eastern front. After World War II, MCC devoted significant financial and human resources over a multi-year period to help resettle thousands of Mennonites from the former free city of Danzig, Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union; many of these migrants had various forms of Nazi entanglements, including cases of participation in units of the German military and security apparatus most directly involved in the Hitler's program of genocide.

MCC's decisions to work with National Socialists during the Third Reich and then to downplay Mennonite-Nazi collaboration after World War II reflected fierce in-group loyalties but also a broad ambivalence toward Hitler's victims. MCC distributed modest aid to Jews, and its leaders occasionally expressed dismay at examples of blatant antisemitism. Yet officials also took advantage of antisemitic prejudices among external refugee organizations to advocate for better access for Mennonites. When the director of MCC's Mennonite Aid Section learned in 1947 that certain elected lawmakers opposed "admitting so

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> William Snyder to C.F. Klassen, "IRO Manuscript Section on 'Mennonites,'" January 24, 1953, IX-19-16.3, box 2, folder 10/18, MCCA.

<sup>28</sup> William Snyder to C.F. Klassen, February 9, 1953, IX-19-16.3, box 2, folder 10/18, MCCA.

Displaced Mennonites wave from the train as they leave the MCC-administered camp in Gronau, Germany, as they begin their immigration journey to the Americas. October 1948. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)



many Jewish refugees to the U.S. as compared to the number of Protestants,” he assessed that “time is now ripe” for MCC to press United States authorities to accept Mennonite applicants.<sup>29</sup> Others blamed Jews for taking transport spots from Mennonites and for raising too many questions about their wartime activities. MCC’s European Commissioner for Refugee Aid and Resettlement, C.F. Klassen, resented Jewish migrants whom he claimed appeared before United Nations screening officers in poor clothing and then, after passing inspection, wore “expensive furs and dresses with more than one diamond ring on their fingers and other jewelry.” Klassen also identified Jews among the UN agents most responsible for raising roadblocks to Mennonites’ own eligibility for financial help, disparaging a supposed pattern of “ignorance, prejudice, stupidity, and not seldom, even wickedness.”<sup>30</sup> Klassen and his colleagues pursued their goals by advocating a topsy-turvy version of history in which European Mennonites had allegedly suffered under totalitarian rule as much or more than Jews. Extensive archival research in recent years by multiple scholars has thoroughly discredited such fictions.

Historical examination and public discussion of this past offer valuable opportunities for MCC and its stakeholders to deepen their commitments to effective worldwide humanitarianism. Evaluating the decisions of previous generations of MCC leaders can help present-day aid workers develop sophisticated tools to navigate ethically challenging situations. Responding to evidence of institutional antisemitism within MCC’s history will benefit the organization’s engagement with Jews, specifically, and it will more generally strengthen MCC’s work in a variety of interfaith contexts. May the next steps that MCC takes on this journey of reconciliation epitomize its mission to serve in the name of Christ.

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<sup>29</sup> William Snyder to C.F. Klassen, May 28, 1947, IX-06-03, box 59, folder 32/56, MCCA.

<sup>30</sup> C.F. Klassen to William Snyder, January 28, 1953, IX-19-16.3, box 2, folder 10/18, MCCA.



## MCC and Mennonite emigration from the Soviet Union, 1920–1932


Almost from its beginnings in 1920, as it responded to famine in southern Russia, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was drawn into migration and resettlement work. MCC's efforts after World War II to resettle several thousand Russian Mennonite refugees had its roots a quarter century earlier. To understand MCC's entanglements with National Socialism's legacy in the post-World War II period, one must understand this earlier story of MCC and broader Mennonite assistance to Mennonites seeking to leave the Soviet Union.

MCC was formed in the United States as a response to the plea of Mennonites in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine) for help. As a result of revolution, civil war, epidemic and famine, formerly prosperous Mennonite communities in Russia were facing social and economic collapse. Many people, including non-Mennonite neighbours, were starving. In early January 1920, the communities commissioned four leading men to travel to and appeal for assistance from coreligionists in Europe, the United States and Canada. More specifically, this "study commission" had two tasks: to mobilize a united relief effort and to explore possibilities for mass emigration from Russia.

The momentum for emigration would intensify through the decade, but even in 1920 many Mennonites no longer saw a future for themselves in Russia. They were aware of growing anti-German sentiment aimed at them, made worse by their welcoming of German occupation forces in Ukraine during 1918. Many of them had experienced violence, murder, rape and pillage, and many had lost their homes during the civil war period. Additionally, many were highly distrustful of the new Soviet regime and its communist ideology. They opposed the regime's early confiscation of property and the exorbitant taxation it levied. They feared the imposition of an atheist curriculum in their schools and the possible closure of their churches. Many Mennonites no longer felt at home in Russia.

In direct response to the study commission, several denominational conferences and their relief committees in the United States came together to form a coalition named MCC. The coalition's mandate was to facilitate the united relief response to the suffering brothers and sisters in southern Russia. Canadian Mennonites supported the fledgling organization through their own denominational conferences and through a short-lived "Canadian Central Committee," later subsumed within the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (which in turn was a predecessor to MCC Canada). By September 1920, MCC had sent three young men—Orie Miller, Clayton Kratz and Arthur Slagel—to southern Russia to facilitate the initial distribution of relief goods, and it had begun an emergency appeal to constituents for money and clothing.

After landing in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), Miller and Kratz travelled on to the Mennonite colonies in southern Russia to arrange for the relief response. But they were unable to complete their mission because Bolshevik Red Army forces began a final push to assert control over the region, causing White Army forces to make a rapid retreat southward. Kratz remained in southern Russia, where he was arrested and presumably killed during this period. Miller returned to Constantinople, where he and Slagel

 **Almost from its beginnings in 1920, as it responded to famine in southern Russia, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was drawn into migration and resettlement work. MCC's efforts after World War II to resettle several thousand Russian Mennonite refugees had its roots a quarter century earlier."**



Russian Mennonite refugees, with officers and crew members, boarding the Hamburg-American Steamship Line vessel "Bayern," in Germany bound for Paraguay, March 1930. This group of sixty-one families, transported from temporary shelter in Germany, were the first of several thousand to be settled in the Paraguayan Chaco with MCC support. (MCC photo)

found themselves helping to care for more than 100,000 Russian refugees who had fled with the White Army. Among these refugees were some Mennonites, including 62 young men who had served in the White Army. MCC provided them with loans to travel to the U.S., where, after considerable advocacy, "the 62" were admitted for resettlement. This initiative was a precursor to MCC's later involvement in migration and resettlement.

In the meantime, while MCC's work was unfolding in Constantinople, two members of the study commission had remained in the U.S. and Canada to explore options for the emigration and resettlement of Mennonites from Russia. (A third, Benjamin H. Unruh, moved to Germany where he assumed an important role in subsequent emigration of Mennonites from the Soviet Union.) As a result of their efforts, two "colonization" organizations were formed to explore and facilitate this emigration: the Mennonite Executive Committee for Colonization (MECC) in the U.S. and the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC). The MECC, later renamed and reconstituted as Mennonite Board of Colonization, was not particularly successful in its work, as U.S. laws were highly restrictive concerning immigrants from eastern Europe: in the end, it was only able to assist some people to resettle in Mexico. The CMBC, on the other hand, successfully persuaded the Canadian government to lift a post-war ban on Mennonite immigration, and thereafter brought some 21,000 Russian Mennonite immigrants to Canada between 1923 and 1930.

[To present-day readers, the language of "colonization" may seem strange. Colonization organizations were not unique to Mennonites during this period. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many religious and ethnic groups developed


agencies to advocate for and support the immigration of their people to Canada and the U.S. Typically, these agencies accepted the widespread understanding that the land to be settled was mostly empty (*terra nullius*). Meanwhile, most of the newcomers who arrived had little knowledge that they were settling on land belonging to Indigenous peoples. It is a significant irony that Mennonites who had been dispossessed of land and assets in Russia benefited greatly from the earlier dispossession of Indigenous peoples in Canada.]

In Russia, MCC needed to be very careful not to associate itself officially with the emigration of Mennonites from Russia to Canada. Alvin J. Miller, MCC's director in Russia, had negotiated more than a year, first with Moscow and then Kharkov (the Ukrainian capital), to obtain permission for MCC to operate its relief program, known as American Mennonite Relief (AMR). Any Soviet assessment that the AMR was simply a "cover" for the real mission of helping Russian Mennonites to escape the country could be devastating for MCC's relief efforts. At one point, B.B. Janz, one of the organizers of Mennonite emigration efforts, was interrogated by the Soviet secret police and asked, "Isn't your main purpose to confer with Alvin J. Miller of the AMR and with him plot the emigration of the Mennonites to America?" (J. B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 146). Miller took great care to ensure that MCC's relief activities remained distinct from the emigration efforts.

Even so, MCC supported the emigration efforts. MCC leaders in the U.S. were in frequent contact with David Toews of the CMBC. MCC field workers in Russia knew the people who were leading the emigration campaign and even attended some of their meetings. When the departure of several emigrant groups was delayed for months, MCC committed to feeding the prospective emigrants while they waited. For a time, MCC also provided food for some emigrants who made it as far as Lechfeld, Germany, where they were detained by Canadian medical officials because of illness. In August 1922, Alvin Miller wrote frankly: "I am still convinced as I have been for more than a year, that the most constructive type of assistance to the Mennonites is the emigration help" (Alvin J. Miller to MCC, August 12, 1922).

By 1925, the Russia famine emergency had ended and MCC's work concluded soon after. Formed to respond to the cry of Mennonites, MCC assisted many non-Mennonites as well. Government officials in both Moscow and Kharkov had insisted that AMR aid be given to the neediest people. In addition to Mennonites, MCC's food aid reached native Russians, Ukrainians and Bashkirs, as well as German-speaking Lutherans and Catholics.

After the Russia emergency response concluded, MCC's future was uncertain. While some of its member groups were eager to see MCC continue, others were prepared for it to disband. The coalition became inactive until 1929. In the meantime, Mennonite families continued to depart the Soviet Union for Canada with the assistance of the CMBC, although such emigration became extremely difficult after 1926. After Stalin's first Five Year Plan in 1928 initiated drastic measures to collectivize agriculture and eliminate the class of peasant land-owners (*kulaks*), Mennonite desire to leave the Soviet Union grew dramatically. In 1929, thousands of Mennonite, Catholic, Lutheran and other German-speaking colonists abandoned their homes and set up camp in Moscow, demanding to be granted passports to leave the country. By the late fall, some 13,000 to 15,000 of these colonists were camped in Moscow, creating an international embarrassment for the Soviets.

 **The strong pro-German sentiment among Russian Mennonites who emigrated from the Soviet Union to Canada, Brazil and Paraguay in the late 1920s translated in many cases to sympathy for the National Socialist regime."**

Learn  
more

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The Soviet government forcibly removed most of these desperate people from Moscow, but it eventually allowed approximately 6,000 individuals—around 4,000 of them Mennonites—to leave for Germany. Benjamin Unruh, among others, had used his influence to persuade the German government to welcome these migrants, if only temporarily. Together with David Toews of the CMBC in Canada, Unruh also pressured MCC to resurrect itself and rescue the families seeking a new home. MCC accepted the challenge and, as historian John D. Unruh put it in 1952, MCC “entered a new field of service—that of immigration and colonization” (Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 26).

About 1,000 of the individuals in Germany were able to resettle in Canada under the auspices of the CMBC. Another 1,000 moved to Brazil with the assistance of the German government. MCC relocated the remaining 2,000 to the Chaco region of Paraguay between 1930 and 1932. There the newcomers established 17 villages in a colony they named Fernheim. They were soon joined by a group of 373 individuals who had traveled eastward, via Harbin, China. Besides making the arrangements for transportation, land purchase and resettlement, MCC provided loans to all the Fernheim settlers to cover the costs associated with this massive undertaking.

MCC’s support for Mennonite emigration from the Soviet Union from the 1920s into the early 1930s, carried out in coordination with other Mennonite agencies and communities, set the stage for MCC’s efforts to assist displaced Mennonites from the Soviet Union after the Second World War. These uprooted Mennonites had different types of entanglements with Germany’s National Socialist regime that complicated MCC’s post-war efforts to help them resettle—from service in the Nazi army to receipt of German citizenship upon resettlement within Germany during the war.

The roots of these entanglements with National Socialism can be traced back decades to the pro-German sentiment that developed among many Mennonites in southern Russia and then the Soviet Union. This pro-German bias was nurtured by multiple factors. First and foremost, there was a shared language and culture—many of the books in Russian Mennonite homes, schools and churches originated in Germany, and many Russian Mennonite intellectuals had in fact studied in Germany. Secondly, many Mennonites had welcomed the German occupation of southern Russia in the last months of the First World War, a period that represented a reprieve from the chaos and instability of the war years and the anti-German sentiment unleashed against German-speaking citizens. Thirdly, Mennonites seeking to escape the Soviet Union in the late 1920s were grateful for Germany’s offer of a temporary safe haven. Fourthly, for many Mennonites, Germany represented a bulwark against the communist ideology of the Soviet Union. Finally, Mennonite emigrants of the late 1920s were influenced by people like Benjamin Unruh who championed the National Socialist cause. An immigrant in Germany from the Soviet Union, an ardent advocate for the Russian Mennonites and an MCC representative in Germany in the 1930s and up until 1942, Unruh was also a strong supporter of the Nazi regime. The strong pro-German sentiment among Russian Mennonites who emigrated from the Soviet Union to Canada, Brazil and Paraguay in the late 1920s translated in many cases to sympathy for National Socialism.

MCC’s efforts after the Second World War to resettle displaced Mennonites from the Soviet Union did not emerge from nowhere: they stood in a



quarter century-long effort by MCC and other agencies like the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization to assist Mennonites in emigrating from the Soviet Union. These decades-long efforts, meanwhile, inevitably became wrapped up with German nationalism and, after the war, with the legacy of Mennonite entanglements with National Socialism.

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## Benjamin Unruh, Nazism and MCC

In 1919, Benjamin Unruh was one of four Study Commissioners sent by Russian Mennonites to the United States and Canada to tell the horrors of revolution, anarchy and impending famine, and to request immediate aid. This stimulated the formation of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). MCC's intersections with Unruh during the National Socialist period are less known.<sup>1</sup>

Most famously, Unruh and MCC's Harold S. Bender worked closely between 1929 and 1931 to resettle some 3,885 Mennonites rescued from Moscow. In fall 1929, more than 9,000 Mennonites and 4,000 other ethnic German farmers from across the Soviet Union fled to Moscow in a last desperate attempt to emigrate. Thousands more were turned back, and those in Moscow were threatened with heavy repression. Unruh convinced the German government in Berlin to bring out thousands from the Soviet Union to transit camps in Germany with assurances of significant repayment from churches in Canada and the United States. MCC's response was sluggish and confused about the crisis' scope and urgency. As the situation in Moscow took on "an ominous character,"<sup>2</sup> Unruh was exasperated with MCC secretary-treasurer Levi Mumaw. "I am waiting on pins and needles . . . The whole world is now looking to our church in Europe and America for what they will do." Only after the Reich Cabinet approved 6 million RM (US\$1,428,000) to transfer and temporarily house the Mennonites in Germany before resettlement abroad,<sup>3</sup> MCC executives met and telegrammed Unruh that they had taken steps



Displaced Mennonites about to leave the MCC-administered camp in Gronau, Germany, on their way to Canada. Ca. 1948. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

<sup>1</sup> See Benjamin W. Goossen's thorough study, "Taube und Hakenkreuz: Verhandlungen zwischen der NS-Regierung und dem MCC in Bezug auf die lateinamerikanischen Mennoniten," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 18 (2017): 133–160. On Nazi Germany's view of Mennonites—transmitted largely by Unruh—see also idem, "'A Small World Power': How the Nazi Regime Viewed Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 92/2 (2018): 173–206.

<sup>2</sup> "11. November 1929, Drahtbericht, Twardowski an das Auswärtige Amt," in Reichskanzlei, "Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland," November 1929–Februar 1935, Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, R 43-I/141, Bundesarchiv, Germany (hereafter BArch).

<sup>3</sup> On costs, cf. Curtius to the State Secretary of the Chancellery, November 6, 1929, in *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik*, Serie B, XIII, 227, no. 104; 228 n.8; budget proposal, November 13, 1929, Reichskanzlei, "Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland," 135, no. 66. All dollar figures throughout are in US\$.

 **“Unruh fanned pro-Nazi sparks with articles in Mennonite papers, especially in Canada.”**

“to mobilize relief forces of Mennonites throughout the country and are confident of full support.”<sup>4</sup> Unruh gave a verbal commitment to the German government as “European representative” of MCC and the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC). The organizations were to collect funds and reimburse the Reich by 1940, with interest payments starting in 1935.<sup>5</sup> MCC chair P. C. Hiebert recognized that “Unruh has been a veritable Hercules in the service he thus rendered.”<sup>6</sup> Executive member Maxwell Kratz signed the agreement on June 2, 1930, noting MCC was unincorporated and its resources “dependent altogether on relief contributions.”<sup>7</sup> This agreement would tie MCC to Unruh long-term.

Unruh’s growing German nationalism was reinforced by events in 1930, including September elections with Nazi gains. Before Adolf Hitler attained power in 1933, Unruh was a financial supporter of the Nazi Party, the German National People’s Party and a Patron Member of the Nazi *Schutzstaffel*, or SS.<sup>8</sup> This new government was willing to use its diplomatic influence for aid to Soviet Germans and to embarrass Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.<sup>9</sup> Hitler donated RM 1,000 for the aid organization “Brothers in Need” in July 1933—among his first official acts.<sup>10</sup> It was chaired by the German Red Cross with Unruh on its board. In one year, CMBC funneled

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<sup>4</sup> Maxwell Kratz to B. H. Unruh, November 27, 1929, IX-01, box 4, file 3-0022, MCC U.S. archives, Akron, Pennsylvania (hereafter MCCA); also Levi Mumaw to C.F. Klassen, November 26, 1929, IX-01-01, box 10, file 210038, MCCA.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. “Verpflichtungserklärung,” no date, IX-01-03, box 7, file 7-0011, MCCA.

<sup>6</sup> P.C. Hiebert to Maxwell Kratz, December 7, 1929, letter, IX-02, box 4, file 2-0001, MCCA.

<sup>7</sup> Maxwell Kratz to John Leibl, German Vice-Consul, Pittsburgh, June 2, 1930, IX-01-01, box 10, file 190004, MCCA.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. B. H. Unruh, “Fragebogen zur Bearbeitung des Aufnahmeantrages für die Reichsschriftumskammer,” October 7, 1937, no. 10 and no. 12, MS 416, Mennonite Library and Archive, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas (hereafter MLA). Unruh also highlights his SS patron membership in a 1940 letter to a government official; cf. Benjamin H. Unruh to SS-Hauptsturmführer Walther Kolrep, January 30, 1940, 2, letter, MS 295, folder 13, MLA. On the responsibilities of this membership, cf. Peter Letkemann, “Nachwort,” in *Fügungen und Führungen: Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, 1881–1959*, ed. Heinrich B. Unruh, 361–447 (Detmold: Verein zur Erforschung und Pflege des Russlanddeutschen Mennonitentums, 2009), 392f.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. recommendation by Herbert von Dirksen, German Ambassador Moscow, to German Foreign Ministry, telegram, July 3, 1933, telegram, “Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland,” R 43-I/141, 188, BArch.

<sup>10</sup> German Red Cross President to the Reich Chancellor (Hitler), July 15, 1933, “Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland,” R 43-I/141, 192, from BArch. Cf. e.g., Ewald Ammende, “Eine Pflicht der Nation. Zur Tragödie des Rußlanddeutchtums,” *Rigaschen Rundschau*, Erste Beilage, no. 54 (8 March 1934); cf. “Der Untergang der deutschen Bauern in Rußland”—recommended in the Nazi government press directives for June 30, 1933 (Gabriele Toepser-Ziegert, ed., *N-S Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit I*, 1933 [New York: Saur, 1984], 45).



MCC relief worker M.C. Lehman (left), accompanied by Columba F. Murray, Commission for Polish Relief, visited Polish Relief Kitchen No. 15 at 37 Bruholowska Street, Warsaw, around 1939. Two thousand seven hundred portions of soup were issued daily. Each portion amounted to 150–160 calories and contained no fats or meat. Lehman administered MCC assistance through the German and Polish Red Cross. (MCC photo)

\$21,377 through Unruh for famine relief.<sup>11</sup> Notably, aid sent through Germany “in the name of Christ” was branded as “Hitler-Help” by Soviet police.<sup>12</sup>

After Canada rejected most Mennonite refugees, Brazil was Berlin’s preferred destination for these Mennonites. Instead, MCC chose a costly investment in Paraguay for, unlike Brazil, it would not require military service from the Mennonite immigrants. Bender envisioned a “Mennonite state” where they could live out their “German culture” undisturbed.<sup>13</sup> “We have assumed full responsibility for the welfare of the colony not only with respect to the German government, but in the eyes of the entire Mennonite world,” Bender reported.<sup>14</sup> MCC’s \$100,000 financial investment was huge. The debt to Germany, however, was double<sup>15</sup> and its interest in these “brothers in need” strong. German cultural influences were beyond what Bender imagined in 1931. “Something is grievously at fault in the colony,” he wrote. A “letter from a certain Kliewer . . . a settler in the colony” was

<sup>11</sup> David Töws, “Immigration und Nothilfe,” *Bericht über die zweiunddreißigste Allgemeine Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada, 1934*, ed. Johann G. Rempel, 65–75 (Rosthern, SK: D. H. Epp, 1934), 73.

<sup>12</sup> “No. 87, Einfluss der Nationalistischen Organisationen und der deutschen Konsulate” (22 May 1934), in *Die Mennoniten in der Ukraine und im Gebiet Orenburg: Dokumente aus Archiven in Kiev und Orenburg*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Hildebrandt (Göttingen: Göttinger Arbeitskreis, 2006), 69f.; 73. Cf. Liesel Quiring-Unruh, “‘Brüder in Not.’ Vor fünfzig Jahren: Wie Deutschland den Rußlanddeutschen zu helfen versuchte,” *Mennonitische Blätter* 6/17 (July 1979): 105.

<sup>13</sup> H. S. Bender, “Die Einwanderung nach Paraguay,” in *Bericht über die Mennonitische Welt-Hilfs-Konferenz vom 31. August bis 3. September 1930 in Danzig*, ed. D. Christian Neff (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1930), 121f.


<sup>14</sup> H.S. Bender to MCC Executive, Report IV: Final and Summary Report, November 8, 1930, 3, IX-01-01, box 11, file 6, MCCA.

<sup>15</sup> B. H. Unruh, “Verzweifelte Selbsthilfe,” in Walter Quiring, *Rußlanddeutsche suchen eine Heimat. Die deutsche Einwanderung in den paraguayischen Chaco* (Karlsruhe: Schneider, 1938), 113.

published with an attack on MCC's representative, Bishop Tobias Hershey, claiming he "was of Jewish extraction."<sup>16</sup>

If MCC was responsible for the establishment of the Fernheim colony, Unruh was its mentor and connection to the "motherland." The colonist experience of Germany was "profound," and many "captured impressions of the National Socialist struggle which they took overseas."<sup>17</sup> Unruh helped the Mennonite colonists to Paraguay navigate their way as Mennonites and Germans, including a Christian recommendation of the "Heil Hitler" greeting.<sup>18</sup> "Just as we have held ourselves pure from foreign influences in Russia," Unruh wrote to the Fernheim colonists, "so also we want to confess faithfully and openly . . . the Germanness of the Third *Reich*, with words and deeds."<sup>19</sup> While a few opposed the movement, Unruh stood them down. "We stand one hundred percent with Adolf Hitler in his God-given calling to lead Germany out of chaos and thus also to support and protect Europe and the world against Bolshevik ruin. One must be childish if one does not see this!"<sup>20</sup>

While this coaching troubled MCC, it was slow to confront. Unruh fanned pro-Nazi sparks with articles in Mennonite papers, especially in Canada. Unruh reminded readers that Christians are always situated in a *Volk*, and that each *Volk* has its unique divine mission. "Being true to God implies being true to one's *Volk*, which in turn requires faithfulness to the nation," as Frank Epp summarized Unruh's articles.<sup>21</sup> MCC was exasperated that Unruh also recommended these "as the policy for Fernheim."<sup>22</sup> By 1935 Bender's mentor John Horsch gave up on Unruh—"such a staunch friend of

 **Unruh's 'exceptionally warm' audience with the Reichsführer-SS, Heinrich Himmler, over the New Year's transition from 1942 to 1943 confirmed Unruh's highest hopes [for Mennonite resettlement] in areas conquered by Germany.'**

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<sup>16</sup> H.S. Bender to MCC Executive, June 15, 1931; Tobias Hershey to Levi Mumaw, Harold Bender and Orie Miller, March 24, 1931, confidential report; "Official Report of Investigation Made in the Russian Colony of the Paraguayan Chaco," March 1931, IX-03-1, box 1, file 4, MCCA. Cf. also "Nachrichten aus Kolonie Fernheim," *Menno-Blatt* 2, no. 3 (March 1931), 4.

<sup>17</sup> B. H. Unruh to Major Reitzenstein, 29 January 1937, 5, letter, MS 416, Potsdam microfilm selections, MLA (copy from Bundesarchiv Potsdam).

<sup>18</sup> B. H. Unruh, December 8, 1934, extracted in B. H. Unruh to Major Reitzenstein, January 29, 1937, 6f., letter, from BArch-Potsdam, copy in MS 416, MLA.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Jakob Warkentin, "Wilhelmy, Herbert," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, online [https://www.mennonitica.org/lexikon/?W:Wilhelmy%2C\\_Herbert](https://www.mennonitica.org/lexikon/?W:Wilhelmy%2C_Herbert).

<sup>20</sup> B. H. Unruh to J. Siemens, January 4, 1936, letter, from MS 416, MLA.

<sup>21</sup> Frank H. Epp, "An Analysis of Germanism and National Socialism in the Immigrant Newspaper of a Canadian Minority Group, the Mennonites, in the 1930s," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1965, 227, 228, 229.

<sup>22</sup> H.S. Bender to Orie O. Miller, May 16, 1944, 2, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana (hereafter GC-A).

<sup>23</sup> John Horsch to Harold S. Bender, October 12, 1935, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 6, folder 2 (John Horsch, 1935–1938), GC-A.





Hitler;”<sup>23</sup> and again in 1936: “He is out and out for Hitler.”<sup>24</sup> In 1938 Bender and retired Bluffton College president Samuel Mosiman both asked if Unruh was an “agent of Berlin.” Unruh connected their opposition to the influence of American exceptionalism, Masonic lodges and the “Jewish” press.<sup>25</sup>

In 1940, Bender met Unruh and made clear that MCC “did not endorse his policies” and “did not wish his line to be followed in Fernheim.” Later Bender felt Unruh had “cleverly exploited” this meeting for his Paraguayan correspondence, giving “the impression that the MCC is supporting Unruh in his [Nazi] attitudes.”<sup>26</sup> Only in 1944 when MCC was interrogated by U.S federal investigators did they see their mistake: “Our failure to repudiate Unruh resulted in a magnification of his influence.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, P.C. Hiebert conceded that Unruh “wholeheartedly supported the Nazi movement,” and if MCC “erred anywhere it was in letting some support get to him when we already knew how he stood.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> John Horsch to Harold S. Bender, November 25, 1936, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 6, folder 2 (John Horsch, 1935–1938), GC-A.

<sup>25</sup> B. H. Unruh to David Toews, September 14, 1938, 3, letter, CMBC Records, vol. 1315, B. H. Unruh Collection, 1936–1938, Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg (hereafter MHA).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. H. S. Bender, “Report of a visit to Mennonite Relief Work in Europe, August 1940,” HM1-278, box 52, folder 17, GC-A; also H. S. Bender to Orie Miller, 16 May 1944, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, GC-A. On Bender’s Visit to Europe in 1940, cf. Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1887–1962* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 289f.

<sup>27</sup> H. S. Bender to Orie Miller, 16 May 1944, 2, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, GC-A.

<sup>28</sup> P. C. Hiebert to Orie Miller [?], May 2, 1944, letter, excerpted in Office of Chief Naval Operation, Navy Department, Intelligence Division, “Intelligence Report,” Re: Paraguay—Political Forces—People—Foreign Infiltration—Foreign Groups [interrogation of Orie O. Miller], August 7, 1944, 4, FBI reference: 100-57384-9; copy in MS 416, folder “Paraguay,” MLA.

Heinrich Himmler (front row, third from right), architect of the Holocaust and the second most powerful man in the Third Reich during World War II, visited the Molotschna Mennonite colony in Soviet Ukraine—which Nazi occupiers renamed “Halbstadt” to sound more Germanic—between October 31 and November 1, 1942. Himmler took a special interest in the Molotschna colony even before he visited it in person; he micromanaged aspects of daily life in the colony—especially the formation of a local *Waffen-SS* regiment composed predominantly of Mennonites—through letters to his subordinates from the spring of 1942 through the colony’s westward evacuation in late 1943. (Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada)

Pictured, from left, are members of the Study Commission (*Studienkommission*) who traveled to the United States in 1920 to seek material assistance in the face of famine and to explore immigration options for Mennonites in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine): A.A. Friesen, John J. Esau, Benjamin H. Unruh and K.H. Warkentin. (MCC photo)



Unruh lived off a small stipend which fluctuated over the years based on German, Dutch, Canadian and U.S. Mennonite support. In letters to leaders across his network, Unruh complained about these financial arrangements. To David Toews, CMBC chair, he wrote: “You blame Bender and Bender blames you. What should I do?”<sup>29</sup> At the 1936 Mennonite World Conference an arrangement was struck, with MCC contributing half of Unruh’s stipend. This agreement never held, and MCC payments were late or partial.<sup>30</sup> Unruh experienced MCC’s Orie Miller as a “hard-nosed American businessman,”<sup>31</sup> and warned that “Berlin authorities will not understand” if Mennonites did not support his office.<sup>32</sup> The “Mennonite method” is to “squeeze the lemon and then throw it away,”<sup>33</sup> and so he pleaded with Miller to protect his self-respect: “This is important not only personally, but also materially.”<sup>34</sup>

MCC continued to benefit from Unruh even as MCC leaders grew more concerned about Unruh’s unapologetic Nazism. In 1939, MCC and Unruh spoke in unison against agitation in Paraguay for a “return” to Germany.<sup>35</sup> Unruh successfully petitioned the Nazi state for debt forgiveness (eventually its entirety), interest reductions and cultural support.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> B. H. Unruh to David Toews, August 7, 1935, letter, vol. 1315, file 890, MHA.

<sup>30</sup> John D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and its Service 1920–1951* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1952), 341; 355n.

<sup>31</sup> B. H. Unruh to David Toews, September 14, 1938, 2, letter, CMBC Records, vol. 1315, B. H. Unruh Collection, 1936–1938, file 889, MHA.

<sup>32</sup> B. H. Unruh to O. Miller, July 29, 1938, 2, letter, MCC CPS and other Correspondence, 1931–39, file 1, MCCA.

<sup>33</sup> B. H. Unruh to David Toews, September 14, 1938, 5, letter, CMBC Records, vol. 1315, B. H. Unruh Collection, 1936–1938, file 889, MHA.

<sup>34</sup> B. H. Unruh to Orie Miller, May 24, 1940, letter, Mennonite Central Committee CPS and other Correspondence 1940–45, file 2, MCCA.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Orie O. Miller to Ernst Kundt, August 1, 1939, letter, and B. H. Unruh to Orie O. Miller and H. S. Bender, 18 July 1939, letter, from Mennonite Central Committee and other Corr 1931–39, file 1, MCCA.

<sup>36</sup> B. H. Unruh to the Reich Ministry of Interior (Finance), January 31, 1940, R 2/11822, vol. 2, Reichsfinanzministerium, 1931–1942, BArch.

With Germany's invasion of Poland, everything changed. Hitler's resettlement plan by race would see ethnic Germans resettled into annexed Poland (Warthegau). "With certainty" this world-historical event would include "60,000 to 80,000 Mennonites" from Russia, Unruh claimed.<sup>37</sup> The German government's Office of Racial Policy anticipated larger numbers of ethnic Germans—"primarily Mennonites"—from Paraguay to return as well.<sup>38</sup> Unruh joined this chorus, but emphasized that MCC "must be treated fairly."<sup>39</sup>

Unruh and MCC found new common purpose with "war sufferers' relief work." MCC asked Unruh to help its appointed representative in Germany, M.C. Lehman, to "make the necessary contacts in Berlin" and "constructively advise him."<sup>40</sup> The invasion of Alsace offered another opportunity. Unruh had "some acquaintance" with its new Reich Commissioner, Robert Wagner, Baden political leader in Karlsruhe. Bender asked Unruh to contact Wagner and "make a formal personal application in the name of the MCC" for a Strasbourg child-feeding operation.<sup>41</sup> Karlsruhe's university Rector praised Unruh in these offices as one "with such high qualities—especially from the National Socialist point of view."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. report in *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* (hereafter GBl) 71/1 (January 1940): 3.


<sup>38</sup> E. Wetzel and G. Hecht, NSDAP Office of Racial Policy, November 25, 1939, "Denkschrift: Die Frage der Behandlung der Bevölkerung der ehemaligen polnischen Gebiete nach rassenpolitischen Gesichtspunkten," in Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Hitlers Ostkrieg und die deutsche Siedlungspolitik: Die Zusammenarbeit von Wehrmacht, Wirtschaft und SS* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1991), 122f.; 124. With regards to "tens of thousands if not hundred thousand" German resettlers from Russia, German officials expressed some concern about the political perspectives of the youth who had been raised wholly with "Bolshevik-communist ideology"; cf. *ibid*, 123. Himmler's office also expected a return of Mennonites from overseas; cf. Der Reichsführer-SS und Chef der Deutschen Polizei, *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 29 April 1940, IV, 10, Zentral Parteiarchiv der SED, Reichssicherheitshauptamt, Abteilung IV, R58/3543, vol. 46, April 1940, BArch-Lichterfelde.

<sup>39</sup> B. H. Unruh to District Mayors, Teachers and Churches of Colonies Fernheim and Friesland, April 28, 1940; and Friesland District Mayor to B. H. Unruh, August 15, 1940, in *Auf den Spuren der Väter. Eine Jubiläumsschrift der Kolonie Friesland in Ost Paraguay, 1937–1987*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff, 172–176 (Asuncion, PY: Verwaltung der Kolonie Friesland, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> Extract from Letter to B. H. Unruh from MCC, November 15, 1939, IX-19-01, box 4, folder 03-19, Europe and North Africa MC Lehman files, December 1939 to April 1940, MCCA.

<sup>41</sup> H. S. Bender, "Report of a Visit to Mennonite Relief Work in Europe, August 1940," HM1-278, box 52, folder 17, GC-A.

<sup>42</sup> May 10, 1940, Rector, Technische Hochschule (TH) Karlsruhe, to Minister of Culture and Education, State of Baden, Germany, from TH Karlsruhe, Universitätsarchiv Karlsruhe, S499, Schrank 2a, Fach 24. Acquired by John Thiesen, MLA, June 2021.

 **Unruh was given a stipend from the SS Ethnic Liaison Office to organize administrative and pastoral support for Mennonites."**

These new mandates gave a mixed message about MCC's attitude.<sup>43</sup> Soon Wagner ordered Jews of Alsace and Baden removed. Throughout his time in Germany, Lehman remained wholly dependent on Unruh.

Germany's invasion of Ukraine again changed everything. Unruh's "exceptionally warm" audience with the *Reichsführer*-SS, Heinrich Himmler, over the New Year's transition from 1942 to 1943 confirmed Unruh's highest hopes. Himmler "told the most complimentary things about [Russian] Mennonites." The dream for Mennonites abroad to return to Ukraine or an expanded Germany was about to be realized. "The resettlement issues will be of unimaginable scope . . . it will probably come true what I told our people when they moved overseas: We will bring you back once again!" Mennonites in Soviet Ukraine, moreover, "will all be naturalized, thus becoming Reich Germans."<sup>44</sup> Unruh would assure proper racial registration, care and protection.<sup>45</sup>

When the military situation in Ukraine changed, and German forces started their retreat from the Soviet Union, 35,000 Mennonites began their trek west. Unruh was given a stipend from the SS Ethnic Liaison Office to organize administrative and pastoral support for Mennonites.<sup>46</sup> Unruh wrote about this task:

 **For Peter Dyck, MCC representative in post-war Europe, Unruh was 'German to the core and therefore is not in a position to handle matters which are also the concern of the British and American occupational forces.'**"

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. "Doc. 113, Report, dated 30 October 1940, on the deportation of German Jews to southern France," BArch, R 3001/20052, fols. 107–108, in *German Reich and Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia September 1939–September 1941*, ed. Caroline Pearce and Andrea Löw (Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 311–312.

<sup>44</sup> B. H. Unruh to Emil Händiges, January 22, 1943, 1b, letter, Vereinigung Collection, 1943, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Bolanden Weierhof, German (hereafter MFSt). On his visit with Himmler, see also B. H. Unruh, *Die Auswanderung der niederdeutschen mennonitischen Bauern aus der Sowjetunion, 1923-1933*, unpublished draft, MS 295, MLA. Original in B.H. Unruh collection, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford, California.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. B. H. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive, January 6, 1943, and idem to Gustav Reimer, December 30, 1943, Vereinigung Collection, 1943, from MFSt. Cf. also post-war letter from the former *Sturmbannführer* responsible for Halbstadt, Hermann Roßner to Schirmacher, March 8, 1972, 5, letter, N/756, 256/a, from BArch-Freiburg. Unruh was member of the Central Office for Kinship Studies of Germans Abroad (*Hauptstelle für Auslandsdeutsche Sippenkunde*). In this role he was personally acquainted with the head of the Reich Office for Kinship Studies—the office of racial "experts" responsible to adjudicate Aryan descent.

<sup>46</sup> Gerhard Wolfrum (VoMi) to B. H. Unruh, September 29, 1943, 159/343, from Technische Universitätsarchiv Karlsruhe. Cf. also Defense testimony by B. H. von Unruh for Werner Lorenz and Heinz Brueckner, December 17, 1947, 2716f. The RuSHA Case, U.S. National Archives Collection of World War II War Crimes Records, Case VIII, Record Group 238, mimeographed testimony; SA 1, file 184, MLA. See also Ben Goossen, "Mennonite War Crimes Testimony at Nuremberg," *Anabaptist Historians* (December 7, 2019), available at <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2019/12/07/mennonite-war-crimes-testimony-at-nuremberg/>.



The *Volk*-community of Greater Germany has cast its eye on us as experienced Mennonite farmers. They want to put our people to work when the victory is won. For our part we will need an unbroken *Volk*-community. We are too devout not to know that it must be sustained and consecrated by Christian faith, not merely—but that too!—by blood. . . . This is our historical duty in this historical hour!<sup>47</sup>

Simultaneously, Unruh was disappointed with MCC's unwillingness to make debt interest payments, frustrating Unruh's negotiations with the German government. "Bender did not act correctly here, and I am still angry with him," Unruh wrote.<sup>48</sup>

After the war's end, 10,000 of 35,000 naturalized Soviet Mennonites were in the western zone of occupied Germany, mostly homeless. "Mennonites in America are slow" in marshalling a relief response, German Mennonite leader Abraham Braun complained to Unruh.<sup>49</sup> In November 1945, Unruh requested that the Mennonite *Vereinigung* (denomination) confirm him as a MCC representative.<sup>50</sup> This allowed Unruh to travel through the occupied military zone and gather refugees. MCC's representative C. F Klassen then asked Unruh "to direct the headquarters" of the refugee search from his office.<sup>51</sup> Unruh was also the first to petition Allied Forces to protect Mennonite refugees from repatriation.<sup>52</sup>

While Unruh understood this post-war refugee work as a culmination of his achievements, MCC's new European representative Peter J. Dyck opposed Unruh, called him an SS-man and falsely insisted (counter to Unruh) that Mennonites became naturalized Germans under duress.<sup>53</sup> "If the military authorities happen to come to [Unruh's] conclusion [that Mennonites from the Soviet Union had willingly accepted German citizenship], which they [the Allied military authorities] have not, then we may as well pack our



In 1947, Peter Dyck (left) and a Mennonite refugee prepare for a small Christmas celebration among the other refugees in an MCC-run camp in Berlin, Germany. For months little toys and useful articles were collected so that each refugee might receive some small gift at Christmastime. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

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<sup>47</sup> B. H. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive ("Zur Tauffrage: Ergänzung I zur Einigungsfrage"), January 31, 1944, 6b, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944–45, from MFSt.

<sup>48</sup> B. H. Unruh, "Grundsätzliches und persönliches an die Vereinigung," January 25, 1944, 3, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, MFSt.

<sup>49</sup> Abraham Braun to B. H. Unruh, November 19, 1945, letter, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, 1930, 1940, 1944–45, MFSt.

<sup>50</sup> Abraham Braun, "Zeugnis," November 19, 1945, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, 1930, 1940, 1944–45, MFSt.

<sup>51</sup> B. H. Unruh to the Vereinigung and Verband, December 19, 1945, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, 1930, 1940, 1944–45, MFSt.

<sup>52</sup> B. H. Unruh to the Vereinigung Executive, December 28, 1945, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, 1930, 1940, 1944–45, MFSt.

<sup>53</sup> B.H. Unruh to H.S. Bender, November 8, 1955, letter, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

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more

Goossen, Benjamin. "Mennonite War Crimes Testimony at Nuremberg." *Anabaptist Historians* (December 7, 2019). Available at <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2019/12/07/mennonite-war-crimes-testimony-at-nuremberg/>.

Lumans, Valdis O. *Hitler's Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933–1945*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1993.

suitcases and go home."<sup>54</sup> For Dyck, Unruh was "German to the core and therefore is not in a position to handle matters which are also the concern of the British and American occupational forces."<sup>55</sup>

After Dyck had shepherded 2,303 refugees to Paraguay and raised monies for MCC's resettlement efforts on a tour of congregations in the U.S. and Canada, MCC tasked Bender to convince Unruh to accept a small pension and promise to withdraw from MCC activity.<sup>56</sup> Bender did this "kindly," though Unruh strenuously objected.<sup>57</sup> A decade later Unruh was still bitter; Dyck "told me verbally and in writing that [the resettlement of Mennonites] was because of *his* effort. I was silent . . . All the slander was a lie."<sup>58</sup>

Unruh was always concerned about his historical legacy, viewing himself as the "Moses" of Russian Mennonites. But by 1955 Dyck had taken the mantle. In Unruh's mind, without his efforts MCC would have had no one to save. Dyck was only bitter that MCC had to lie to save the refugees. To Elder Heinrich Winter in Leamington, Ontario, Dyck later said: "How disastrous it was that you accepted citizenship in war-time Germany. . . . Were there no men among you to stand up against this foolishness?"<sup>59</sup> Unruh took hope again in 1955 with the Soviet release of German civilians and POWs: "Imagine, dear Harold, what that means! . . . Our people are *naturalized Germans*. I was blamed for encouraging this. I did it with good consideration and with prayer! And now *success*."<sup>60</sup>

In 1955, Unruh unsuccessfully petitioned for a pension increase, though MCC covered his publication debt in 1957.<sup>61</sup> "It was not easy" for MCC to decide to give him further assistance, Bender wrote Unruh. "We did it out of love for you and in view of our many years of fruitful cooperation."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Peter J. Dyck, "Memorandum on Mennonite Refugees in Germany, 25 July 1945," MCC CPS and other Correspondence 1945–47, file 30, MCCA.

<sup>55</sup> Peter J. Dyck, "Mennonite Refugees in Germany as on September 5, 1946," report, MCC CPS and other Correspondence 1945–47, file 30, MCCA.

<sup>56</sup> See Peter J. Dyck and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up from the Rubble* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1991), 250f.; *Lethbridge Herald* (August 21, 1947): 5.

<sup>57</sup> Keim, *Harold S. Bender*, 394f. Cf. MCC Executive Committee Minutes, August 3, 1948, no. 16, p. 3; and 30 December 1948, no. 19, 5, MCCA.

<sup>58</sup> B. H. Unruh to H. S. Bender, November 8, 1955, letter, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

<sup>59</sup> Henry H. Winter, *Shepherd of the Oppressed: Heinrich Winter* (Leamington, ON: Self-published, 1990), 190f.

<sup>60</sup> B. H. Unruh to H. S. Bender, October 23, 1955, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

<sup>61</sup> MCC Executive Committee Minutes, December 16–17, 1955, no. 34, MCCA.

<sup>62</sup> H. S. Bender (using MCC letterhead) to Unruh, July 3, 1957, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

Unruh died in 1959. In Bender's *Mennonite Encyclopedia* entry on Unruh, he noted briefly that Unruh worked for MCC "in immigration to Paraguay 1930–1933."<sup>63</sup> This statement underplayed Unruh's magnitude: he was a tireless advocate for his people who remains a towering figure in the history of Russian Mennonites, especially in Paraguay. Bender's encyclopedia entry on Unruh also covered over how Unruh's advocacy for and humanitarian efforts on behalf Mennonites from the Soviet Union were inextricably intertwined with his increasingly strident support for the Nazi regime. A full account of Unruh's firm pro-Nazism is an essential part of assessing how MCC's humanitarian efforts with Soviet Mennonites were entangled with National Socialism and its legacy.

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<sup>63</sup> Bender, Harold S. "Unruh, Benjamin Heinrich (1881-1959)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959. Available at: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Unruh,\\_Benjamin\\_Heinrich\\_\(1881-1959\)&oldid=170166](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Unruh,_Benjamin_Heinrich_(1881-1959)&oldid=170166).

## **MCC and Nazi impressions of Paraguay's Mennonite colonies in the 1930s and 1940s**

In late 1929, approximately 3,800 Mennonites living in the Soviet Union fled to Moscow after the Soviet government labeled them as *kulaks*, which under Soviet rule had become a disparaging term applied to farmers who were wealthy enough to hire laborers. Weimar Germany's Federal Foreign Office considered the Mennonites to be German refugees and granted them passage to Germany, where they remained for several months. With the aid of the German government and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), 1,500 refugees relocated to Paraguay's remote Gran Chaco. Here they created the Fernheim Colony (Fernheim means "faraway home") a few kilometers away from a second Mennonite settlement named the Menno Colony. The culturally conservative Menno Colony was founded a few years earlier by Mennonites who left Canada after a decades-long struggle with the Manitoba and Saskatchewan provincial governments over compulsory public schooling. The Fernheim and Menno colonies held religious and cultural similarities, but their different interpretations of how Mennonites should engage the modern world placed them at odds for the better part of two decades.

Despite the colonies' mutual antipathy, MCC and the ascendent Nazi government in Germany viewed them as remote bastions of Mennoniteness or Germanness, respectively. Throughout the 1930s, both worked to incorporate the colonies into imagined transnational communities of Mennonites or ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*). Most importantly, MCC and the Nazi regime shared modern assumptions that humanity was moving toward the consolidation and interdependence of like peoples. This article

**“Throughout the 1930s, both MCC and the ascendant Nazi government in Germany worked to incorporate the [Mennonite colonies in Paraguay] into imagined transnational communities of Mennonites or ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*).”**

compares the views of MCC and the Association for Germans Abroad (*Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland*, or VDA) toward the Mennonite colonies in Paraguay in the 1930s and 1940s. I argue that both organizations viewed the Fernheim Colony refugees as more amenable to their aims than Menno Colony's voluntary migrants. In other words, the colony most suited to MCC's notion of transnational Mennonite unity was the colony that was most suited to the Nazi government's notion of transnational racial unity.

Unlike Menno Colony members, who had migrated from Canada to Paraguay for a shared reason that was in line with their history and beliefs, the Fernheim Colony lacked a collective history and shared beliefs of what it meant to be a Mennonite. The Fernheim colonists were a random collection of refugees gathered from across the Soviet Union. They came from different conferences and congregations, encompassing a range of professions and lifestyles. As a result, Fernheim colonists engaged in heated arguments over what it meant to be Mennonite and German. Some argued that God had called them to the Chaco to proselytize to their Indigenous neighbors on behalf of the global Mennonite church, while others believed that God would restore them to their Russian homeland if they collaborated with the ascendant Nazi regime in Germany.

 **German officials looked on the compact, agrarian Mennonite colonies in the heart of South America as a strategic connection to the German 'homeland.'**"

Five thousand miles away, a growing number of Mennonites in the United States and Canada were absorbing liberal, humanist attitudes about church-state relations. During the 1920s and 1930s, these Mennonite intellectuals, including the founders of MCC, reinterpreted the confession's traditional tenets of voluntary membership in the church and the separation of church and state as analogous to the democratic tenets of individual freedom and religious pluralism. They helped create conferences, institutions and aid agencies that supplanted the confession's myriad and confusing local expressions of "Mennoniteness" with a few key tenets that were easily articulated to external audiences, especially to national governments. Despite the reality that most of the world's Mennonites were indifferent or opposed to their idealistic goals (including the Menno Colony), Mennonite intellectuals reasoned that a new era of Mennonite history had arrived that legitimated the confession's transnational solidarity and permanent settlement in democratic and liberally-oriented countries. During the interwar years, MCC attempted to incorporate both colonies into an imagined, global Mennonite body: a Mennonite nation, so to speak.

Simultaneously, Nazi leaders in Germany were reimagining the world's German-speaking population as a transnational racial community. Like the Mennonites, their imagined "German nation" was incredibly heterogeneous. Aside from the millions of German-speakers living in foreign countries, such as Russia and the United States, Europe's German-speakers were physically divided between Germany, Austria and Switzerland. They held different (and contentious) religious affiliations, and were fractured by contrasting political ideologies (monarchism, communism, socialism and fascism). Rural German-speakers, especially those living in German enclaves abroad, were often more oriented to local or regional concerns rather than national or international politics. Nevertheless, the VDA—which counted over two million members in 1929—advanced strident claims that the German state should help all members of their imagined German nation. In one book, published in conjunction with the German Migration Office, the VDA noted, "In modern German history, there is no period in which the boundaries of nation and state overlapped completely." Despite this handicap, the





organization argued that an “alertness” of Germany’s global connections “forms the spirit and cultural community of all Germans!” With a fillip from the Nazi Party’s rise to power in 1933, this mandate extended to even the most remote ethnic German communities, including the Chaco Mennonites.

Like MCC, the VDA assumed that nodes of similar people could be found across the globe who shared essential qualities and were obliged to help each other. The nazified VDA therefore looked on the compact, agrarian Mennonite colonies in the heart of South America as a strategic connection to the German “homeland.” For this reason, the VDA sent Mennonite Nazi Peter Hildebrand to bring the colonists a shipment of supplies and stay on to teach school in Fernheim Colony. Hildebrand was born in Russia in 1906 and was trained as a teacher before he fled to Harbin, China, in 1930. There, he taught German-speaking refugees while attempting to immigrate to Canada, Mexico, the U.S. or Germany. Hildebrand eventually moved to Germany and his years as a Soviet refugee led him to identify with the Nazi party’s anti-communist stance. Before Hildebrand and his wife, Susie Penner, moved to Paraguay in 1934, he was associated with the Nazis’ *Sturmabteilung* (SA), amongst other Nazi organizations.

When Hildebrand started teaching at Fernheim Colony’s secondary school, he was pleased to hear his students greet him with a “Heil Hitler!” Hildebrand also addressed a colony assembly in Filadelfia about the new German government titled “Germany under the Nazi Government and Its Interest for Overseas Germans.” His talk focused on questions about Germany’s economic recovery, the German education system, the “Jewish Question” and Hitler as a person and as a leader. Hildebrand also brought with him 800 Reichsmark, donated by the VDA, and a shipment of the German school textbook, *Curriculum of the German Elementary School*, which painted subjects such as geography and history in a Nazi hue.

Yet Hildebrand was not satisfied with simply bringing VDA resources to Paraguay. He also wanted to prove the settlement’s allegiance to

Mennonite settlers in Paraguay in the early years of establishing the Fernheim colony. With help from a loan from the German government, MCC assisted with the immigration of Soviet Mennonites to Paraguay in 1930. (MCC photo)

Germany. In early 1935, he organized the shipment of 1,500 kilograms of peanuts from Fernheim to the VDA. The peanuts were distributed to German schoolchildren as a sign of goodwill between the colony and their “homeland.” Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring were also presented with small sacks of peanuts, the latter receiving the gift on his wedding day. The gesture was publicized in the German press and the Fernheim Colony received a flood of appreciative letters. According to Hildebrand, one “enthusiastic” Hitler Youth member wrote, “we love you because you have also sent peanuts to our leader.” Hitler and Göring’s acceptance of the peanuts validated the colonists’ belief that they were real Germans and validated the VDA’s belief that the colonists were collaborators in a shared story of German solidarity.

Despite the VDA’s hope that the Menno Colony would also pursue transnational solidarity with the German nation, Menno Colony members were indifferent to the Nazi movement and its leaders flatly declined the VDA’s school materials. Most of the colony’s indifference stemmed from the fact that it did not share an “imagined community” with the German nation-state, German Mennonites or other German-speaking enclaves. Their Germanness lacked a political, nationalist edge. It was not something that they elected to participate in, but something that was inscribed in the daily rhythms of life such as church, food, language and other folkways. Moreover, their voluntary and self-funded migration to Paraguay did not make them financially dependent on Germany—or MCC, for that matter. Menno Colony leaders viewed both German and MCC initiatives as intrusive threats to their communal loyalties.

At the end of 1935, a group of parents in Fernheim called into question Hildebrand’s teaching after one student stabbed another student and threatened to stab several more. Hildebrand abruptly resigned from his position when community leaders investigated the issue. Had Hildebrand stayed, Fernheim’s leaders intended to dismiss him because he did not believe in Christ, he did not regularly attend church and he spoke disparagingly about the Mennonite faith. Ironically, colony leaders also considered dismissing Hildebrand because he did not exhibit enough German national consciousness. Apparently, Hildebrand had reported to Berlin authorities that some of the colony’s leaders were anti-German. Colony leaders felt that this action undermined the colony’s unity, which simultaneously undermined its German unity.

In 1938, Harold S. Bender visited Paraguay’s Mennonites for the first time. Eight years earlier, he boldly proclaimed at the Second Mennonite World Conference that MCC wished to create a “Mennonite state” in the Gran Chaco. Before his trip, Bender clung to a vision that the Mennonites in Paraguay should be a unified stronghold of a pure Mennonite faith, connected to a global Mennonite church. Like contemporary Nazi ethnographers who were disappointed when they encountered the cultural bricolage of German enclaves in Eastern Europe and their indifference to German unity, Bender regretfully noted, “I wish it were possible to speak of the Mennonites of Paraguay as one united body, but alas, this is not the case.” His subsequent report reveals that he considered himself to be a qualified grader of the colonies’ Mennoniteness, with the Nazi-courting Fernheim Colony receiving the best marks because they most resembled Mennonites in the United States and Canada.

**“Bender was coy about the colony’s difficulties and interest in Nazism, opaquely noting that ‘Not everything in Fernheim is perfect . . . but there is no need to enter into details here,’ thereby suggesting that any unpleasanties with the project were best ignored.”**



The central meeting hall of the Fernheim Mennonite colony in Paraguay around 1935. Hanging at center is a picture of Adolf Hitler. The banner uses the well-known Nazi slogan, “The Common Good Above Self-Interest.” Leaders of the Fernheim Colony had welcomed Hitler’s accession to power in 1933 and continued to maintain friendly relations with the Third Reich over the following decade. (Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas)

After Bender’s plane touched down in Asunción, he was greeted by former Fernheim Mennonites who were living in the capital. Menno Colony leader, J. A. Braun, also greeted Bender because he happened to be in Asunción on other business. Traveling north to the Chaco, Bender spent a few days visiting the Menno Colony elder M. C. Friesen, whom he described as an “able man, determined to maintain uncompromisingly the principles of his group, and evidently succeeding in doing so.” Bender was impressed with the material progress the colony had made though he unfavorably portrayed the people as “very conservative” and desiring “little contact with others.” He had nothing to report on their religious life, but instead pressed on to the Fernheim colony.

Bender had a preexisting ideal of what “correct” Mennonitism looked like and wished to discover this phenotype in the Fernheim Colony. He therefore gushed that the colony was “the most important and most interesting of all the Mennonite groups” in Paraguay because it “represents the great relief project which was undertaken in 1930 by the Mennonite Central Committee.” Skirting the edges of solipsism, Bender wrote that colonists are “anxious to prove worthy of their privileges and blessings” on account of their salvation from Russia, and therefore “anxious for fellowship with the Mennonites of North America.” The reason why the group was “important” to Bender was because MCC had helped create it, and the reason why it was most interesting was because some of its members wished to draw closer to U.S.-style Mennonitism.

Bender was coy about the colony’s difficulties and interest in Nazism, opaquely noting that “Not everything in Fernheim is perfect . . . but there is no need to enter into details here,” thereby suggesting that any unpleasantness with the project were best ignored. He reassured his North American audience that Fernheimers “have maintained a staunch Mennonitism thus far . . . including the principle of complete nonresistance,” which he increasingly viewed as the litmus test for true Mennonitism, but was in fact a more ambiguous tenet for colonists whose lives had been suffused with violence and upheaval since the First World War. Bender admitted “there are good reasons why most of us from North America would not want to exchange [places] with them,” but he believed that the colony’s isolation from the outside world portended great things.

Learn  
more

Eicher, John. *Exiled among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Thiesen, John D., *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes Among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933-1945*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999.

Despite evidence to the contrary—including colonists' growing fascination with Nazism and two mass exoduses that reduced Fernheim's population by over one third—Bender concluded that the colony was a “paradise” and “the best organized, the most prosperous, and spiritually the soundest Mennonite colony in Paraguay.” The outbreak of the Second World War a year later introduced uncertainty and urgency to Bender's assessment. Yet MCC met these fears with its participation in the U.S. government's Civilian Public Service (CPS) program, which allowed young Mennonites to perform nonviolent “work of national importance” rather than fight. During and after the war, MCC's young and confident CPSers and later Pax volunteers evangelized the fruits of U.S. Mennonitism, medicine, education and business practices in Paraguay and around the world.

Despite the obvious differences between Mennonite and Nazi aid agencies, both agreed that the modern world required clearly defined populations, with clearly defined loyalties, who were settled in permanent locations. The Menno Colony's strictly local identification was too narrowly focused to fit into these imagined worlds, and the Fernheim refugees' conflicting group identifications were too divergent to reassure either MCC or the VDA that they were entirely loyal to their causes. The tension in the Fernheim Colony would only be resolved after 1945, but until then, the Fernheim Colony's outward orientation, largely on account of their position as refugees, divided their loyalties between the globalist ambitions of both agencies.

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## Between German fascism and U.S. imperialism: MCC and Paraguayan Mennonites of Fernheim during the Second World War

The Second World War had many frontlines. One of them divided the pacifist inhabitants of Fernheim, a Mennonite settlement in the northern part of Paraguay. Fernheim had been founded nine years before the outbreak of the war by refugees from the Soviet Union and with the strong support of Mennonite organizations and churches in Germany, the United States and Canada, among which Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) figured prominently. In close cooperation, they had supplied humanitarian aid to German-speaking Mennonite settlers by providing them with the means to survive the austerity of the Paraguayan Chaco and by assisting them in the occupation of a territory that previously had provided the livelihood of Indigenous people.

Yet the rise of National Socialism increasingly strained relations among the settlers as well as between MCC and its partners in Germany. One group in Fernheim—the so-called *völkische* (racial)—was led by the charismatic teacher Fritz Kliever and Julius Legiehn, who was the chairman of the settlement during the first years of the 1940s. Encouraged by Mennonites in Germany, the *völkische* saw National Socialism as a recipe to overcome the

**“The U.S. government warned that it would place MCC as well as the whole German settlement on a so-called ‘proclaimed list’ if Kliever and Legiehn weren’t removed from the settlement.”**



harm that communism had inflicted on their children. Furthermore, after the German attack on the Soviet Union, they hoped for an opportunity to return to the land they had left. The other group received the label *wehrlose* (defenseless). With the support of MCC, the *wehrlose* warned against the danger of politicization and insisted that supporting an aggressive regime was inconsistent with Mennonite beliefs.

The conflict between both groups escalated on March 11, 1944, when a group of young men belonging to the *völkische* armed themselves with pitchforks and allegedly a revolver and threatened their adversaries. The incident came to the attention of the U.S. embassy in Paraguay, which was in contact with MCC representatives living in Fernheim. The U.S. government warned that it would place MCC as well as the whole German settlement on a so-called “proclaimed list” if Kliewer and Legiehn were not removed from the settlement. That step would have meant that any business transactions with the outside world would become virtually impossible. The MCC representatives affirmed this demand and pressured the Fernheimers to comply. Eventually, both Kliewer and Legiehn had to leave the colony and to settle in the eastern part of Paraguay. The *völkische* lost their leaders, and subsequently MCC managed to diminish the influence of the pro-Nazi faction in the colony.

But why did the U.S. embassy even care about a small group of Mennonite settlers living in the periphery of a small Latin American country? Answering this question helps us to understand the political framework in which MCC was developing its humanitarian work. The mentioning of the “proclaimed list” gives us a key of how the incident was embedded in a broader story of U.S. imperialism in the Western hemisphere.

Traditional U.S. foreign policy considered Latin America part of its sphere of influence. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Washington had established an imperial dominance over the other countries in the Western hemisphere to benefit from their raw materials and agriculture. However, since 1934, the German Third Reich had developed closer economic relations with Latin America to meet its steadily growing demand for raw materials. The German economic expansion came at a cost to the United States. Thus, in 1936, representatives of U.S. business interests requested that the government act on their behalf to maintain their hold over Latin America.

The potential threat that Germans living in these countries might become a “fifth column” provided the perfect legitimation for engaging in a kind of economic warfare. According to this scenario, the U.S. was threatened by the German minority living on the American continent. At any moment these Germans could become a danger to the U.S. and its interests.

In reaction to these fears, the State Department reactivated a strategy from the First World War by creating the “proclaimed list”—a register of all businesses on the American continent owned by people of German, Italian or Japanese background. Under this legislation, U.S. companies were forbidden to conduct any business with firms or individuals who appeared on the “proclaimed list.” Since Latin American companies who did business with firms on the list were also automatically included in the register, the strategy became an effective source of pressure. The U.S. government hoped thereby to deal a decisive blow both to German economic expansion and



Oven constructed in 1948 in an anthill by Mennonite settlers in the new Volendam colony established by Soviet Mennonites whom MCC helped migrate from Europe to Paraguay. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

**“ MCC representatives were able to fight back against those in the colony who were spreading the ideology of National Socialism among the Mennonite settlers. However, by doing so, MCC acted within the framework of an imperialist foreign policy agenda and with instruments that were meant to enforce U.S. influence over Latin American countries.”**



Baptism ceremony in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Some of the displaced Mennonites from the Soviet Union whom MCC assisted in immigrating to Paraguay first had to wait for months in Argentina in tents before receiving permission to continue on to Paraguay. 1947. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

to subversive activities, which, in the eyes of analysts at the U.S. State Department, German national businesses in South America were ready to support.

Following the entrance of the U.S. into the war in December of 1941, the State Department attempted to unite the Latin American states to resist “fascist infiltration” within the continent. In Paraguay, the government led by Higinio Morínigo (1940-1948) was initially hesitant to comply. The military, which played an important role in the Paraguayan government, included a significant group of German sympathizers, who were outraged at the efforts by the U.S. to intervene in their affairs.

However, in response to pressure from Washington, and in the hopes of securing loans from the U.S., Morínigo announced the cessation of relations with the Axis powers on January 28, 1942. Shortly thereafter, his government introduced a series of measures against German citizens living in Paraguay. Their freedom of movement was restricted, and they were forbidden access to various forms of communication. The Paraguayan government also forbade all forms of propaganda, including wearing German uniforms or the display of Nazi symbols. German cultural institutions were no longer permitted to carry out activities that “posed a danger.”

On the basis of this legislation, Kliever and Legiehn were removed from the Paraguayan Mennonite settlement of Fernheim. MCC’s action during this incident was decisive in putting an end to the agitation of the *völkische* contingent in the colony. Using the threat of the “proclaimed list,” MCC representatives were able to fight back against those in the colony who were spreading the ideology of National Socialism among the Mennonite settlers.

However, by doing so, MCC acted within the framework of an imperialist foreign policy agenda and with instruments that were meant to enforce U.S. influence over Latin American countries. Then (as today) there was no such thing as unambiguous humanitarianism.

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### An historical view from Paraguay

Paraguayan Mennonite historian, Gerhard Ratzlaff, first wrote about the *völkische* movement in Fernheim Colony in his 1974 master's thesis. Ratzlaff had originally intended to write his thesis on the economic development of the Paraguayan Mennonite colonies, but changed direction at the urging of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) leader William Snyder. Ratzlaff's thesis included discussion of MCC's response to the growth of the *völkische* movement. Ratzlaff observed that some Fernheimers in the heat of the conflict between the *völkische* and *wehrlose* factions condemned MCC as a "tool of politics." For his part, Ratzlaff recognized that "To hear that Mennonites in Paraguay identified with National Socialism must have struck American Mennonites with horror." He continued:

The MCC undoubtedly had an honest desire to help the Paraguayan Mennonites, but in war time they had to be first Americans and serve the interests of their state. Otherwise they would not even have been allowed to serve a "German" community in Paraguay. It is therefore not surprising that after the end of 1941 they took the side of the anti-*voelkische* movement. Before an MCC worker went to the colony he had to pass through the American embassy in Ascunción. Willingly or unwillingly the MCC workers became involved in the political machinery of their state. (Ratzlaff, "An Historical Political Study of the Mennonites in Paraguay," 225-226).

Ratzlaff returned to an examination of MCC's response to the pro-Nazi movement in Fernheim during World War II in his 2014 history of MCC in Paraguay between 1930 and 1980. Ratzlaff reflected that

The situation and attitude of the MCC towards the Mennonites in Paraguay during the Second World War was difficult and complicated. This was mainly due to the fact that MCC's fellow believers in Paraguay showed themselves to be enthusiastic supporters of National Socialism. They thus represented the inhuman, violence-affirming ideology of the country with which North America was at war. But the Mennonites in Paraguay—even with the best will—could not really understand [how MCC workers viewed the *völkische* movement]. (Ratzlaff, *Das mennonitische Zentralkomitee in Paraguay, 1930-1980*, 107).

In this overview of MCC's history in Paraguay, Ratzlaff expressed gratitude for MCC's efforts to help Mennonites from the Soviet Union immigrate to Paraguay who without MCC advocacy would have been denied the ability to migrate because of their war-time participation

Ratzlaff, Gerhard. *Das mennonitische Zentralkomitee in Paraguay 1930-1980*. Ascunción: ACOMEPA, Oberschulzenrat der mennonitischen Kolonien Menno, Fernheim, Friesland, Neuland und Volendam, 2014.

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in Nazi military bodies. Ratzlaff discussed how Peter Dyck, “to help his fellow believers,

acted on various occasions against the ordinances of the military authorities and the Allies, who condemned the SS as a whole as criminal. No former member of the SS was allowed to be taken overseas, for example to Paraguay. Peter Dyck, thank God—as he personally said—did so without knowing who actually had been a member of the SS. These people later settled in Volendam and Neuland, and the MCC helped them too—without discrimination among individuals. As Peter Dyck said with a smile, his only valid criterion [for assisting a prospective immigrant to Paraguay] was the Low German language—not the person’s past. (108)

From Ratzlaff’s perspective, a blanket approach that would have denied emigration from Europe to all Mennonites who had participated in German military units would have been unjust and would have deprived Paraguayan Mennonite colonies of members who led lives of charity and neighbor-love.

*Compiled by Alain Epp Weaver, editor.*

## From care to rescue: MCC in the face of the persecution of Jews in France, 1939–1945

As Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worked to care for displaced people in France in the run-up to and during the Second World War, its staff witnessed the intensified persecution of Jewish people in the country. While MCC’s work during this period primarily consisted of humanitarian aid distribution and the operation of children’s homes, MCC staff also became involved in efforts to rescue Jews from Nazism’s genocidal program as Nazi antisemitic measures intensified.

In the Rivesaltes internment camp in France, the summer of 1941 was a summer of death. The arid climate, mosquitoes and insufficient and polluted water contributed to disease outbreaks. The crowding of over 2,000 Spanish, Jewish and Roma refugees in the camp resulted in high mortality among infants and other vulnerable people. Rivesaltes was one of the camps hastily built by the French government in 1939 as temporary housing for the 465,000 Spanish refugees who flocked to France after Franco’s victory over the Republicans. But the authorities underestimated the scale and duration of this migration. They did not have the means to implement their refugee policy: internment envisioned as provisional was prolonged, and refugees began to run out of essentials. Humanitarian and religious organizations then intervened to address the needs both inside and outside the camps that the French government failed to meet.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jewish, Catholic and Protestant organizations coordinated their action in the internment camps under the aegis of the “Committee of Nîmes.” In addition to MCC, other organizations include Cimade, YMCA and AFSC, many of whose workers participated in the rescue of Jews and who later received the “Righteous Among the Nations” designation.

**“As MCC staff in France mobilized humanitarian efforts, they witnessed first-hand the antisemitic policies carried out jointly by the Nazi military authorities and the collaborationist Vichy regime.”**





Girls from the Rivesaltes internment camp staying in the MCC-operated Villa Saint-Christophe, Canet Plage, France, first managed by Swiss Mennonite Charlotte Gerber in April 1941 and then by U.S. Mennonites Helen Penner and Lois Gunden starting in April 1941. Together with Quaker worker Mary Elmes, Gunden worked to rescue Jewish children from French internment camps like Rivesaltes from being sent to their probable death in German-run concentration camps. (MCC photo)

MCC's work in southern France began in December 1939, when it sent Amos Swartzentruber to determine what help MCC could provide. Over the next few years, MCC initiated multiple humanitarian assistance programs for displaced peoples. In cooperation with the Quakers of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), MCC decided to open a "convalescent home" for children in internment camps who suffered from malnutrition and lack of hygiene. Edna Ramseyer, a young MCC worker from Bluffton, Ohio, took charge of the house in La Rouvière, near Marseille. MCC also organized a food distribution several times a month in Banyuls, near the Spanish border, as well as a canteen in a neighboring village, Cerbère, which fed around 60 children. In August 1940, Harold Bender himself went to France to assess MCC's program options. In consultation with the mayor of Lyon, Édouard Herriot, and a YMCA official, Samuel Ybargoyen, MCC workers set up a food program in nursery schools in Lyon and Saint-Étienne. They also financed a summer colony, rue de Tourvielle, in 1942.

After its defeat by Germany in 1940 and the establishment of the authoritarian regime in Vichy, France opted for collaboration with the Nazis and a policy of exclusion: the internment camps in France's "southern zone" were filled with 50,000 stateless Jews, Roma and other "undesirables." Within this context, MCC in April 1941 rented the Villa Saint-Christophe in Canet-Plage (Pyrénées-Orientales), a large mansion that opened directly onto the beach, where children interned at Rivesaltes could stay. First run by Charlotte Gerber, a Swiss Mennonite, Villa Saint-Christophe was taken over in October 1941 by Helen Penner and Lois Gunden, two MCC volunteers from the United States.<sup>2</sup> Through Lois Gunden and her friend from Quaker Relief, Mary Elmes, MCC workers became connectors in the network of organizations authorized to intervene in the camps.<sup>3</sup>

**“ Throughout August and September 1942, desperate Jews in Lyon came to the office of MCC director Joseph Byler to plead for help to escape. To stay within the legal framework and not jeopardize MCC's work, Byler refused all clandestine assistance.”**

<sup>2</sup> After taking over the administration of La Rouvière in December 1940 from Edna Ramseyer, Charlotte Gerber prepared the opening of the Villa Saint-Christophe and took charge of it between April 1 and August 1941. She returned to Switzerland for health and visa reasons.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Elmes (1909-2002) was born in Ireland. After involvement in Quaker humanitarian efforts during the Spanish Civil War, Elmes became the AFSC manager for Roussillon. Her actions contributed to the rescue of several Jewish children. She is recognized as "Righteous Among the Nations" (file n ° 12543).



Lois Gunden, left, and Helen Penner set out on the American Export Lines' ship, "Excambion," in early October 1941, more than a year after France had surrendered to the Nazis and was under German occupation. (Photo courtesy of Gunden/Clemens families)

**“ Mary Elmes and Lois Gunden moved into illegal action. As a matter of urgency, they removed numerous children from the camp, negotiating the trust of the parents and then secretly hiding them. They thus saved dozens of children from death, later earning them the title of Righteous Among the Nations from Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.”**

As MCC staff in France mobilized humanitarian efforts, they witnessed first-hand the antisemitic policies carried out jointly by the Nazi military authorities and the collaborationist Vichy regime. One does not find much comment in MCC's archival records from the initial part of this period on Nazi measures, even as MCC staff offered general critiques of antisemitism. On the back of a photo showing several young girls from the colony, Edna Ramseyer noted their first names and their origins (French, Alsatian, German Jewish) and commented: "Can you see a difference? I guess children are very similar. Too similar to fight about the differences."<sup>4</sup> MCC workers welcomed all persecuted people indiscriminately. In the summer of 1942, the situation suddenly worsened. To implement its genocidal "final solution," the Nazis demanded 40,000 "foreign" Jews from the French government. After several raids, including that of Vel d'Hiv, in the occupied zone, the Nazi hunt for Jews spread to the southern zone: MCC workers faced increasingly difficult cases of conscience.

Throughout August and September 1942, desperate Jews in Lyon came to the office of MCC director Joseph Byler to plead for help to escape. To stay within the legal framework and not jeopardize MCC's work, Byler refused all clandestine assistance, writing in his journal that "we are definitely not helping people to go anywhere illegally."<sup>5</sup> Some requests for help were suspicious, involving demands for money and persons Byler suspected of spying for the authorities to learn more about MCC's operations. Yet the refusals were particularly heartbreaking in the case of mothers begging for their children to be taken care of, to whom Byler responded that he could not do anything to help. In his journal, Byler recorded the rounding up of Jews for an uncertain fate: "We heard that last day 450 Jews were arrested and sent to Germany. Nobody seems to know why, or for what to do."<sup>6</sup> On August 26, 1942, at the height of the persecution, Byler wrote that "An old gentleman came to the office begging us to lock him up somewhere for only one night. The poor man was really scared. But there was nothing we could do for anyone. Swiss radio announced that 650 people had been rounded up in Lyon last night."<sup>7</sup> The same evening, MCC staff gathered for a meal in a restaurant and, according to Byler, had "a lot of fun."<sup>8</sup>

However, in the face of intensified violence, Byler and MCC's responses evolved. The violence of the raids in the summer of 1942 shifted the opinion of many French people towards more compassion, because of the impact on women and children. Reflecting on the situation of one of the Jewish friends of MCC workers, Mrs. Federn, who lived in fear, Byler wrote in his journal: "Oh this Jewish persecution is awful. Some commit suicide, and others try to. It is simply beyond imagination for 20th century civilization."<sup>9</sup> In partnership with other social service groups in Lyon, MCC began actively seeking to protect Jewish children released from transit camps, such as the

<sup>4</sup> Edna Ramseyer Kaufman Papers, file MS 300, Box 9, Mennonite Library Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph N. Byler, Journal, Folder 1, Box 2, HM1/354, Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., journal entry, August 13, 1942.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., journal entry, August 26, 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., journal entry, August 31, 1942.

one in Vénissieux, following “screening” operations. MCC and other agencies placed these Jewish children with families and sought to open other shelters. Byler prospected near Lyon, Henry Buller near Chambéry, Lois Gunden in Collioure and Vernet. These MCC workers also intervened on behalf of Jewish friends by activating their administrative and diplomatic contacts.<sup>10</sup> They campaigned for U.S. visas for 1,000 Jewish children, but to no avail. Henry Buller struggled for Beate Rosenfeld, the MCC secretary, and her parents, German Jewish refugees. Buller finally married Beate on November 11, 1942, when the Germans invaded the town hall of Lyon. MCC also worked with Lyon’s prefect and chief of police to help Cecil Lowenthal, a young Jewish woman interned in Rivesaltes, get out of the camp.

To supply the Nazi demand to deliver “foreign” Jews, the Vichy government emptied the internment camps. In Rivesaltes, the deportations began on August 11, 1942: 2,313 men, women and children left in nine convoys, first to Drancy, then to Auschwitz. Mary Elmes and Lois Gunden recognized the significance of these deportations: “Miss Mary informed me of the return of Polish and German Jews to Poland where they will starve to death.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike Byler, Mary Elmes and Lois Gunden moved into illegal action. As a matter of urgency, they removed numerous children from the camp, negotiating the trust of the parents and then secretly hiding them. They thus saved dozens of children from death, later earning them the title of Righteous Among the Nations from Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

After the invasion of France’s southern zone by the Germans, diplomatic relations between Vichy and the United States were severed. At the beginning of 1943, U.S. humanitarian workers and diplomats still on French soil were interned in Baden-Baden at the Brenner’s Park Hotel. MCC entrusted Mennonite relief work to two exceptionally energetic non-Mennonite men: a French Protestant, Roger Georges, and a Spanish Mennonite sympathizer, Augustin Coma. When the Germans requisitioned the Villa Saint-Christophe, Roger Georges rented the Château de Lavercantière in the Lot (not without difficulties, because several of his protégés were Jewish) by advancing his own funds. After a Gestapo raid on the Lyon office, Georges moved to Pont-de-Vaux, in Bresse, facing serious financial problems because the MCC funds sent via the Swiss Consulate in Lyon were blocked. He then refocused help on Lavercantière, which he looked after with his wife. When the money was released, in the fall of 1943, he opened a “modern summer camp” in Châtillon-de-Michaille, where he housed 100 to 120 school-aged boys from Lyon and the Parisian suburbs. In 1944, he opened two more children’s homes in Plottes (Saône-et-Loire) and Vescours (Ain), receiving more than a hundred children from Lyon and Marseille: “At the time of liberation I had nearly 400 children in the four centers,” he later testified.<sup>12</sup> Roger Georges

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., journal entry, September 23, 1942.

<sup>11</sup> Lois Gunden, journal entry, August 8, 1942, HM1/926, box 1, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana. See also the testimony of Ginette Drucker submitted to Yad Vashem “Témoignage de Ginette (Drucker) Kalish, adressé à Yad Vashem en vue de faire décerner un hommage posthume de ‘juste parmi les nations’ à Lois Gunden,” in Simonne Chirloeu-Escudier and Mireille Ciroleu, *La Villa Saint-Christophe, Maison de convalescence pour enfants des camps d’internement* (Saint-Estève: Alliance, 2013), 173.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Georges, “Rapport d’activités de nov. 1942 à juin 1947,” *Souvenance Anabaptiste* 18 (2000): 26.



Gunden, Mary Jean. “Lois Gunden: A Righteous Gentile.” *The Mennonite* (September 1, 2013). Available at <https://anabaptistworld.org/righteous-gentile-lois-gunden-righteous-gentile/>.

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Krémer, Jean-Paul. *Le salut ne vient pas d’Hitler, Un mennonite déporté à Natzweiler et Buchenwald*. Ed. Stéphane Zehr. Alès, France: Calvin éditions, 2020.

is one of those figures who have remained in history's shadows, but who were decisive in the rescue of Jewish children made possible by MCC's humanitarian action in France.

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## John Kroeker and the backstory to the “Berlin Exodus”

The most famous MCC story, maybe *the* central MCC story in its one hundred year history, is the “Berlin Exodus” narrative made famous by Peter J. Dyck, with himself as the lead character, in repeated tellings that began almost while the event was still in progress. One can find this narrative of MCC's work to get 1,115 Mennonites out of the Soviet-controlled sector of Berlin in late January 1947 in his memoirs,<sup>1</sup> and in many film and video formats.<sup>2</sup> As with all mythologies, there are backstories and contexts that cast the “Berlin Exodus” narrative in a different light.<sup>3</sup>

Peter Dyck came into the story of MCC support for displaced Mennonites from the Soviet Union who were in Berlin following the Second World War after those efforts were well underway. The central character in the preceding events was John Kroeker, whom Dyck portrayed as an opponent or villain, although an interesting Mennonite insider villain.

Kroeker was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1894, while his father Jakob (who later became well-known as an Old Testament expositor) was attending the Baptist seminary there. After seminary, the family returned to southern Russia (present-day Ukraine) and then in 1910 back to Wernigerode, Germany. John/Hans Kroeker returned to Crimea just in time to serve in the Russian medical and quartermaster services in World War I, both in the Caucasus and on the European front. When the war was over, he married in Crimea and then fled with his family to Wernigerode. After six years in Wernigerode and Berlin, he and his family moved to Chicago in 1926. Ten years later they moved again, to Newton, Kansas. Up until 1936, it seems that he made a living mostly in import-export businesses. After the move to Newton, he apparently shifted to literary pursuits—translation and freelance writing. All of Kroeker's adult initiatives were undermined by

**“ Kroeker's work [with the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*, an organ of the SS] allowed him direct contact with Mennonites among the returnees—through these efforts, Kroeker became concerned with maintaining a distinct identity for the Mennonites, not wanting them to be submerged in the general mass of other refugees.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up from the Rubble* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 132-136. A very short version is Peter J. Dyck, “A Cry for Help,” *Festival Quarterly* 12/3 (Fall 1985): 34-35, where he makes no mention whatsoever of MCC workers who preceded him to Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest is a visual-only version which Dyck was already using in 1947 as a movie with his own in-person narration: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH\\_nb-5zEWg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH_nb-5zEWg). For a later version, see the video *New Beginnings: Mennonite Refugees to South America* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1988). Most recently, see *Volendam: A Refugee Story*, directed by Andrew Wall (Winnipeg, MB: Refuge 31 Films, 2020); DVD.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the only critical scholarly analysis is T. D. Regehr, “Anatomy of a Mennonite Miracle: The Berlin Rescue of 30-31 January 1947,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 9 (1991): 11-33, which focuses specifically on the Soviet decision to let the exodus take place.





his alcoholism and consequent inability to manage his finances and other matters. I suspect that in the present he would probably be diagnosed with PTSD, perhaps initiated by his World War I experiences.<sup>4</sup>

Kroeker's writings in Mennonite publications pursued vehemently anti-Soviet themes, along with criticism of Mennonite peace activists' cooperation with political pacifists. These articles actually said relatively little directly about the new Germany under the Nazis. He also wrote, often anonymously or under pseudonyms, for Gerald Winrod, a Kansas fundamentalist radio preacher and right-wing political figure who was widely popular with Mennonites. Here Kroeker was harsher, giving credence to conspiracy theories about Jews, in keeping with Winrod's public pronouncements.<sup>5</sup>

Surprisingly, Kroeker and his wife were privately disdainful of Hitler.<sup>6</sup> His parents also expressed anti-Nazi sentiments until early 1933 when they became much more cautious.<sup>7</sup>

In July 1939, Kroeker was one of 76 participants from the United States and Canada on a trip to Germany sponsored by the *Verein für das Deutschtum*

John Kroeker (standing at the middle-right edge of the group) with some of the people who stayed at the "Menno Center" he established at Viktoria-Luise-Platz 12a in Berlin for displaced Mennonites from the Soviet Union. 1945 or 1946. (Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas)

<sup>4</sup> Some biographical details are in Maria and Anna Kroeker, *Ein reiches Leben: Erinnerungen aus dem Leben des Missionsdirektors Jakob Kroeker* (Korntal-Münchingen: Licht im Osten, 2020; orig. 1949). See also John D. Thiesen, "Writing the Autobiography of an Imperfect Stranger," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 36 (2018): 181-188.

<sup>5</sup> *Trotsky, by a Former Russian Commissar* (Wichita, KS: Defender Publishers, 1937).

<sup>6</sup> John J. Kroeker papers, MS.501, folder "Correspondence - Kroeker, Hans and Tina to each other 1936," Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas (hereafter MLA).

<sup>7</sup> MS.501, folder "Correspondence - Kroeker, Jakob and Anna 1933-1939," MLA).

Displaced Mennonite children from the Soviet Union in Berlin, Germany, 1946. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)



*im Ausland* (VDA), an organization promoting contacts with Germans living outside of Germany.<sup>8</sup> The group arrived in Germany exactly seven weeks before the Nazi and Soviet attack on Poland which started World War II. This led to his remaining in Germany, apparently fearing that as a stateless person who had been born in Germany, he could be interned if his return ship was stopped by the British or French.<sup>9</sup>

In the meantime, Kroeker attempted to involve himself in MCC's small projects during the war's early years in Europe, highlighting his fluency in German, English and Russian, and his previous experience in export-import businesses.<sup>10</sup> Kroeker maintained communication with MCC representatives in Germany M. C. Lehman and Benjamin Heinrich Unruh through 1940 but nothing concrete seems to have come of these contacts.

Details about Kroeker's employment during his years in Germany are hard to track down. He seems to have had a continued association with the VDA.

**“ Harold Bender and P. C. Hiebert called Kroeker ‘absolutely unacceptable’ [as an MCC representative] and ordered ‘immediate disassociation’ from Kroeker as soon as a legitimate MCC representative would arrive in Berlin.”**

<sup>8</sup> MS.501, folder “Manuscript - Erleben des Grossdeutschen Reiches.” This manuscript seems to say that Kroeker's war-time work in Germany was with the *Deutsches Ausland-Institut* (DAI) rather than the VDA. His 1944 letter to Kauenhowen, however, says VDA: Kurt Kauenhowen, February 10, 1944, MS.501, folder “Correspondence - Kauenhowen, Kurt 1944,” MLA.

<sup>9</sup> Kroeker to Abraham Warkentin and P. H. Unruh [both in Kansas], February 25, 1940, IX-19-1, box 4, folder 03-19 “MCC Europe and North Africa MC Lehman Files - MCC Corr. in Germany, Dec 1939-Apr 1940,” MCC U.S. archives, Akron, Pennsylvania (hereafter MCCA). For some unknown reason, Kroeker's official “Permit to Reenter” from U.S. Immigration was in Martin C. Lehman's MCC files, IX-19-1, folder 3/26, box 4, “MCC Europe and North Africa MC Lehman Files US Corr 1940-42,” MCCA. It had been issued June 24, 1939, and ran for one year. It had then been extended to December 24, 1940.

<sup>10</sup> Kroeker to Lehman, February 1, 1940, IX-19-1, box 4, folder 03-19 “MCC Europe and North Africa MC Lehman Files - MCC Corr. in Germany, Dec 1939-Apr 1940,” MCCA. On Lehman, see his obituary from the Mennonite Weekly Review, [https://mla.bethelks.edu/mediawiki/index.php/Lehman,\\_Martin\\_C.\\_\(1883-1963\)](https://mla.bethelks.edu/mediawiki/index.php/Lehman,_Martin_C._(1883-1963)) (accessed May 30, 1995). The obituary noted that Lehman worked for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Europe for more than a decade after the war.

That organization was eventually absorbed into an SS-affiliated office called the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (VoMi), the Ethnic German Liaison Office, which dealt mainly with ethnic German returnees from eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> His VoMi work allowed him direct contact with Mennonites among the returnees and through these efforts Kroeker became concerned with maintaining a distinct identity for the Mennonites, not wanting them to be submerged in the general mass of other refugees. He made extensive visits to refugee groups in early 1944, and his advocacy for better treatment for them and even for non-Germans caught up in German-controlled areas apparently caused friction with his SS superiors.<sup>12</sup>

Nothing more seems to have come of this flurry of activity in the first part of 1944. His VoMi work evaporated as the regime fell apart. Once the war was over, he actively sought journalistic or translation work, using his fluency in the Allied languages. After a couple of months, he took steps that led directly to his gathering together Mennonite refugees in Berlin. He hired a secretary and by early July had rented an office where he hoped MCC could locate if they came to work in the city. He also avidly looked for U.S. military personnel and, through one of them, he sent word back home.<sup>13</sup> At some point during this time Kroeker rented the building at Viktoria-Luise-Platz 12a, which became his refugee center. On August 4, 1945, he used the name “Menno Centre” for his work for the first time; this was probably when he began referring to his work as a “Provisional Representation” of MCC.<sup>14</sup> He sent a long report dated August 27, 1945, to Harold S. Bender, M. C. Lehman and Abraham Warkentin (a pastor and Bethel College professor in Newton) detailing the post-war situation of Mennonite refugees in Berlin and reporting his self-labeling as an MCC representative. This caused some consternation among MCC officials. Bender and P. C. Hiebert called him “absolutely unacceptable” and ordered “immediate disassociation” from Kroeker as soon as a legitimate MCC representative would arrive in Berlin.<sup>15</sup> The basis of the criticism was clearly Kroeker’s alcoholism and its consequences, plus the fear that he might be running up debts in MCC’s name. There may have also been a background concern about the stridency of Kroeker’s criticism of church peace programs in the Mennonite press. Overall, MCC’s concern seems to have been the potential public relations problem of MCC being associated with someone of Kroeker’s reputation.

C. F. Klassen, the first North American MCC contact, visited on November 28, 1945, when there were over 100 refugees living at Viktoria-Luise-Platz.

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<sup>11</sup> MS.501, folder “Berlin material - Employment with SS,” MLA.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, a letter to Kurt Kauenhowen, February 10, 1944, MS.501, folder “Correspondence - Kauenhowen, Kurt 1944,” MLA. See also Kroeker to C. F. Klassen, August 16, 1948, and attached documents, IX-19-9, 1/58, “C. F. Klassen Files - European Corr., Misc. Corr. U.S. 1947-52,” MCCA.

<sup>13</sup> MS.501, diary entries for June 11 and 14, July 4, 5, and 8, and August 14, 1945, MLA.

<sup>14</sup> August 4, 5, and 6, 1945, diary entries.

<sup>15</sup> Kroeker to Bender, Lehman, Warkentin, August 27, 1945; Hiebert and Bender to Ori Miller and Sam Goering, September 25, 1945, folder IX-19-02, 4/20, “MCC Europe and North Africa England Relief, Germany-Kroeker Report 1945,” MCCA.



Mennonite refugees leaving the harbor at Bremerhaven, Germany, on the ship Volendam in 1947. The group led by Peter and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck was the first of three groups of Mennonite refugees transported by the Volendam to South America in 1947 and 1948. (MCC photo)

Kroeker was disappointed that Klassen did not bring any sort of food aid or other supplies. Klassen did not cut off Kroeker's activities, as the earlier MCC correspondence had suggested should happen, but did tell him that "in Newton they don't want him in MCC."<sup>16</sup>

At least two other MCC-connected representatives visited Kroeker in Berlin over the next few months. First was Teerd Oeds Hylkema, a Dutch Mennonite pastor apparently working for the Red Cross, on about January 11, 1946. Hylkema seems to have arranged for at least a portion of the group of Mennonite refugees at Viktoria-Luise-Platz to move to a United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) camp in early March, where housing and food conditions were better.<sup>17</sup> On April 10, 1946, another MCC worker, Robert Kreider, visited Kroeker at Viktoria-Luise-Platz—he would have been aware of Kroeker and his reputation since Kreider had lived in Newton and graduated from Bethel College.<sup>18</sup>

Peter Dyck finally arrived at Viktoria-Luise-Platz on June 14, 1946, more than a year after the end of the war and about six months after the first MCC worker had visited Kroeker to assess the situation of Mennonite refugees in the city. A week later, the over 200 residents at Viktoria-Luise-Platz were moved to a new camp set up by Dyck.<sup>19</sup> Dyck then gradually edged Kroeker out of the refugee business (not the immediate cut-off ordered earlier), although people continued to filter through Viktoria-Luise-Platz to MCC for at least a month. During this period, Dyck accused Kroeker not only of drunkenness but of extorting money from the Mennonite refugees to bribe Soviet soldiers to ignore the Mennonites who lived under threat of forcible return to the Soviet Union.

Dyck tried to facilitate returning Kroeker to the U.S. "I really don't know what America or Newton would want him for, but we will be glad to see him go."<sup>20</sup> But in fact Kroeker stayed in Berlin almost another year, working some of the time for the Allied prison at Spandau, again relying on his linguistic fluency. The "Berlin Exodus" took place on January 30, 1947, and Kroeker was somehow forced to clean up the houses at the end of March, complaining that a lot of trash had been left behind and that trash haulers had to be bribed. Kroeker finally left Germany on July 8, 1947, eight years to the day after he had left New York in 1939.<sup>21</sup>

Probably several hundred of the Mennonite refugees who left for South America on the ship *Volendam* passed through John Kroeker's Viktoria-Luise-Platz 12a facility. The connection of this story to Nazism is both obvious and ambiguous. The very presence of the refugees was the result of

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<sup>16</sup> October 12, November 28, and December 1, 1945, diary entries.


<sup>17</sup> Diary entry, March 5, 1946. Jacob Loewen, "Berlin Victoria-Luise-Platz," *Der Bote* 61/21 (May 23, 1986), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kreider to his parents, April 12, 1946, Robert Kreider papers, MS.264, box 66, folder "Bob to Folks 1946," MLA.

<sup>19</sup> Diary entries, June 14 and 22, 1946.

<sup>20</sup> Diary entry, July 27, 1946. Peter Dyck to William Snyder, August 4, 1946, "Mennonite Central Committee CPS and other Corr 1945-47, File 30, Dyck, Peter J. 1946," MCCA.

<sup>21</sup> Diary entries, January 20, March 28, July 8, 1947.

 **Probably several hundred of the Mennonite refugees who left for South America on the ship *Volendam* passed through John Kroeker's Viktoria-Luise-Platz 12a facility."**



the Nazi attempt to destroy the Soviet Union and many of its inhabitants. Kroeker, the main character in the story, vehemently embraced the anti-Soviet theme in Nazism but criticized, at least in private, many other aspects of the movement. By the end of the war, he worked in an SS-affiliated organization that enabled his network of refugee contacts. Even while working in the SS bureaucracy, he did not take up party membership or German citizenship and continued to use his anglicized first name John rather than the German Johann, even in his SS employment paperwork. Peter Dyck, Kroeker's harshest critic, suggested that his refugee work grew out of his need for alcohol, but also admitted that without Kroeker "there would have been no Volendam sailing to South America with several thousand people."<sup>22</sup> Despite Kroeker's political flaws and mental health challenges, he took initiative to mobilize aid for displaced Mennonites in Berlin when no one else was willing or able to do so.

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<sup>22</sup> *Up from the Rubble*, 134. Peter Dyck refers here to Kroeker simply as "Hans."

## Facing the future, reinterpreting the past: MCC's solutions for successful Mennonite immigration after the Second World War

The capitulation of Nazi Germany did not end the period of suffering and instability that Mennonites had experienced in the Soviet Union or the Third Reich during World War II. Instead, new challenges confronted those who desired to rebuild their lives elsewhere. Interest in immigration to the Americas was high, and ethnic Germans regardless of their religious backgrounds searched for aid from organizations who could help facilitate their dreams of a new beginning.

The choices Mennonites had made during the war, however, haunted them to varying degrees as officials checked wartime service records, conducted interviews and reviewed immigration eligibility. Each step had the potential of preventing someone from being accepted by a new homeland. Oftentimes, the solution to these obstacles involved an attempt at forgetting or erasing one's wartime experience, whether it was military service for the Third Reich, the acceptance of German citizenship or participation in or benefit from the Holocaust. Benefit from the Holocaust included receiving goods or property that once belonged to Jews.<sup>1</sup>

Although there were multiple checks that would-be immigrants needed to pass, ranging from one's occupation to physical health, requirements relating to Nazi Germany affected many of the Mennonites from the Soviet

<sup>1</sup> Connie Braun, *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia: A Mennonite Memoir* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008), 109, 110. Doris Bergen, "The Nazi Concept of 'Volksdetusche' and the Exacerbation of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, 1939-45," *Journal of Contemporary History* 29/4 (October 1994), 571, 572.

Learn more

Dyck, Peter and Elfrieda. *Up from the Rubble*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991.

Regehr, Ted D. "Anatomy of a Mennonite Miracle: The Berlin Rescue of 30-31 January 1947" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 9 (1991): 11-33.

Smucker, Barbara. *Henry's Red Sea*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1955.

Thiesen, John D. "Writing the Autobiography of an Imperfect Stranger." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 36 (2018): 181-188.

**“MCC used everything in its power—connections with government officials, political and personal influence, the historical record, geopolitics and legal argument—to help Soviet Mennonites erase or diminish any previous connections to Nazi Germany that might prevent their immigration.”**



Robert Kreider, MCC representative, checks MCC relief supplies in a warehouse in Germany in 1947. Relief work in the U.S. sector of Germany immediately after World War II was permitted through the Council of Relief Agencies Licensed for Operation in Germany (CRALOG). Distribution of goods was placed in the hands of German agencies with oversight from representatives of U.S. voluntary agencies providing the relief supplies. Robert Kreider was selected as one of the representatives located in the American Zone. (MCC photo)

Union who had made their way slowly westward during the war. With the past so neatly recorded by the Nazi regime, how then did Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) succeed in erasing the Nazi collaboration of the Soviet Mennonites it helped bring to Canada, the United States and other countries? MCC not only distributed aid and provided shelter for Mennonite refugees in western Europe after World War II, but it also thought of creative solutions for each problem encountered during the immigration process. Although there were times that the International Refugee Organization (IRO) or its predecessors like the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) effectively blocked the processing of Mennonite immigrants, these halts were always temporary. MCC used everything in its power—connections with government officials, political and personal influence, the historical record, geopolitics and legal argument—to help Soviet Mennonites erase or diminish any previous connections to Nazi Germany that might prevent their immigration.

After World War II, an important distinction was quickly made between Displaced Persons and refugees. Until 1950, one typically needed to be considered a Displaced Person to be aided by a UN organization or secure a spot in Canada and the United States' immigration quotas. Much of the Soviet Mennonite past, however, was not in accordance with the definition of a Displaced Person (DP). DPs were citizens of Allied countries or those who had been forcibly removed from their homes during World War II. In addition to German citizenship was the question of the "Great Trek" in 1943 from the Soviet Union to Germany or Poland. Had those ethnic Germans, including Mennonites, willingly left or had they been forced to? How about cases in which individuals had served the Third Reich in a military capacity or collaborated in other ways?

To each of these problems, MCC formulated a solution. First, MCC leaders argued that Soviet Mennonites were not ethnic German; instead, they were Dutch or should be able to use "Mennonite" as an ethnicity or nationality. The only religious group the UN recognized by an ethno-religious title were Jews. MCC leader Peter Dyck traveled to the headquarters of the U.S. military government in Frankfurt to meet with American military officers. At this meeting, Dyck argued that Mennonites coming from the Soviet Union should be treated like the Jews who "regardless of their nationality, are automatically given the status 'D.P.' on the grounds that they are victims of persecution."<sup>2</sup> While this argument did not result in automatic DP status for Mennonites based on persecution, there were individuals who recorded "Mennonite" or "Mennonite – Dutch origin" as their nationality on immigration forms.<sup>3</sup> Mennonite historian Cornelius Krahn wrote an

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<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Dyck, June 25, 1946, IX-19-3, box 1, folder 1/23, MCC U.S. archives, Akron, Pennsylvania (hereafter MCCA).

<sup>3</sup> Aganeta Rempel AEF DP Registration Record, 0.1/68777155/ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Anna Wiebe AEF DP Registration Record, 0.1/69676745/ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Abram Peters AEF DP Registration Record, 0.1/8790666/ITS Digital Archive. Elizabeth Pätkau, 0.1/68542094/ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Elvira Nickel, AEF DP Registration Record, 0.1/68416450/ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust

extensive paper on why, given similarities with Dutch language, last names, farming methods and more, Mennonites could and should claim Dutch rather than German ethnicity or nationality.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the question of whether Mennonites left their homes in what is now Ukraine willingly, MCC argued that they did not, using quoted interviews to describe what had happened in the fall of 1943 in towns like Chortitza.<sup>5</sup> UN guidelines stated that “should they have left of their own free will at the time of advance of the Russian Army, availing themselves of condition of ‘debauch’ or of German assistance, to leave their places of habitual residence, exclusion clause 4c would apply.”<sup>6</sup> Exclusion clause 4c would remove Soviet Mennonites from any hope of classification as DPs. Indeed, IRO policy not only clearly stated that DP status excluded ethnic Germans, but that those who had freely left their homes to escape the Allied armies were ineligible. Because of the Mennonites’ argument that they were distinct from other ethnic Germans who had lived in Ukraine, however, the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR) created a document that focused specifically on the eligibility of Mennonites based on their unique circumstances. Finding the historical record lacking, the IGCR accepted

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Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Jacob Neudorf, AEF DP Registration Record, 0.1/68402958/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Erich Hann, Fragebogen für DPs, 0.1/79164730/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Heinrich Hann, Fragebogen für DPs, 0.1/79164733/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Frieda Hann, Fragebogen für DPs, 0.1/79164732/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Erich Hann, Fragebogen für DPs, 0.1/79164730/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Erich Hann family, Application for IRO Assistance, 0.1/79164734/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Agathe Hann, Fragebogen für DPs, 0.1/79164731/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Heinrich Braun, Gesuch auf Bestand PCIRO, 0.1/87963290/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Olga Braun, Fragebogen für DPs, 0.1/78963288/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Anna Harms Bär, Fragebogen für DPs, 0.1/78908188/ ITS Digital Archive. Accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 30, 2018. Richard Innes to Sir Herbert Emerson, “Eligibility of Mennonites,” February 4, 1947, Folder 2325/110, AJ 43 51, Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France.

<sup>4</sup> Orie Miller and William T. Snyder to Herbert Emerson, Jan. 20, 1947, Folder 1151/76, AJ 43 31, Archives Nationales.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Hamm, “Translation of Statements given by Mennonite Refugees Concerning their Naturalization (‘Einbürgerung’) and Stay in Poland (Warthegau),” AJ 43 476, Archives Nationales. Kurt Karl Klein, Ecumenical Refugee Commission to Council of Deputies of the Foreign Ministers of the Great Powers, 1092/56/1, AJ 43 19, Archives Nationales.

<sup>6</sup> J.C.J. Hogerzeil to Herbert Emerson, Feb. 1947, Folder 146, AJ 43 462, Archives Nationales.



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**Community involvement in coaching responses for paperwork and interviews to adjust one's identity was common after World War II. Word quickly spread as to what to present during the immigration process."**

MCC's arguments in favor of Mennonite eligibility.<sup>7</sup> The IGCR ruled that Soviet Mennonites who were eligible for immigration as DPs had to be of Dutch origin and forced to leave their homes in Ukraine. Alternatively, if a Soviet Mennonite was ethnically German and willingly left with the German Army, fleeing in advance of the approaching Soviet Army, they were ineligible.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the question of German citizenship, while hotly debated within UN organizations, was often ruled in MCC's favor. MCC's claim that Soviet Mennonites had no choice in accepting German citizenship led to many being granted DP status by UN organizations.<sup>9</sup>

The arguments that MCC presented about citizenship and wartime collaboration were not blindly accepted, however. When evidence was later found at the Berlin Document Center proving that some Soviet Mennonites had eagerly accepted German citizenship or willingly served in the Third Reich's military, MCC had to produce new strategies.<sup>10</sup> Often, MCC leaders turned to their contacts in positions of influence—George Warren in the U.S. State Department, Major-General J.A. Wood, Jr. from the U.S. IRO office or Canadian government leaders—to exert political pressure on whichever UN organization had placed a halt on Mennonite immigration. MCC leaders routinely traveled to lobby officials and plead for the reinstatement of Mennonite eligibility. MCC presented their arguments or applied pressure in a variety of ways: by pointing to Soviet Mennonites' previous eligibility, by comparing the U.S. regulations to Canada's and vice versa or by submitting historical reports.<sup>11</sup>

This work did not only occur at the highest levels, however. At MCC camps, knowledge that could help Soviet Mennonites pass eligibility checks was circulated. This is seen, for example, in the extreme similarity in written biographies required for eligibility paperwork. Instances in which only birth date and birthplace changed across multiple narratives indicates the presence of coaching in MCC camps. Between January and July 1951, five men originally from Chortitza signed statements at Mennonite camps. These German and English-language autobiographical sketches were conspicuously similar in style and format. After listing their date and place of birth in the

<sup>7</sup> M.S. Lush to IGCR Lemgo, Feb. 19, 1947, Folder 146, AJ 43 462, Archives Nationales.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Innes to Sir Herbert Emerson, "Eligibility of Mennonites," Feb. 4, 1947, Folder 2325/110, AJ 43 51, Archives Nationales.

<sup>9</sup> William Snyder, May 2, 1951, Folder "Mennonite Central Committee," Box 23, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. (hereafter NARA).

<sup>10</sup> "British Zone Germany Information Circular Number 24," Jun. 24, 1948, Folder 31/6, AJ 43 572, Archives Nationales.

<sup>11</sup> W.A. Wood, Jr. to Meyer Cohen, Aug. 5, 1949, Folder 959, Box 1325, CMBC Series 3A, Mennonite Heritage Center, Winnipeg (hereafter MHC). Hugh Keenleyside and A.L. Jolliffe to MCC Executive Committee Members, Aug. 11, 1949, Folder 959, Box 1325, CMBC Series 3A, MHC. William T. Snyder to C.F. Klassen, Dec. 2, 1948, Folder 957, Box 1325, CMBC Series 3A, MHC. Snyder to Wood, Aug. 12, 1949, Folder "Mennonite Central Committee," Box 23, NARA.





Arthur Voth at the MCC office in the regional processing center of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) at the Fallingbostel camp in Germany, May 1948. (MCC photo) On March 31, 1948, Voth wrote to MCC representative in Europe C.F. Klassen about an “upheaval” at the Fallingbostel camp, with an IRO official claiming that “most” of the Mennonites in the camp had served in the *Wehrmacht* or SS and had been “untruthful in representing their cases.” The IRO official, Voth continued, accused MCC of “instructing them [the refugees] not to produce any [German documents]; instead they should say they had none.” Voth reported that the IRO official continued that “all other DPs had documents, only the Mennonites did not, and that had he been aware of the fact that they were being passed without documents, he would have clamped down long ago.” Voth informed Klassen that he was instructing Mennonite refugees to find whatever employment documents they could from during the war. After a few days, the “crisis” had passed. (Arthur Voth to C.F. Klassen, March 31, 1948, IX-4-2, MCC Gronau Files Corres, Fallingbostel, CF Klassen Corres, 1948-50, MCC archives, Akron, Pennsylvania).

first phrase, the men wrote that they had “fled from my home Communistic Russia” in 1943. They then described where the Nazis had resettled them and their subsequent coercion into joining the *Waffen-SS*. They each downplayed their military service, often stating that they were sick or transferred from one assignment to another and had spent little time on the Western Front.<sup>12</sup>

The similarity of these statements, found in C.F. Klassen’s file at the MCC archives in Akron, Pennsylvania, indicates that someone knowledgeable about the eligibility process coached the men to portray themselves in a positive light. As MCC’s European Commissioner for Refugee Aid and Resettlement, Klassen was familiar with policy and would have known how to frame an immigration appeal.<sup>13</sup> Immigrant hopefuls also knew which documents to keep hidden. Referring to documents describing them as *Volksdeutsche*, a UN official commented, “No such documents have been discovered by interview . . .”<sup>14</sup> Community involvement in coaching responses for paperwork and interviews to adjust one’s identity was common after World War II. Word quickly spread as to what to present during the immigration process.<sup>15</sup> In reference to someone in the camp, Peter Dyck stated: “Out of fear and confusion, and to protect his loved ones, he has not always stuck to the truth.”<sup>16</sup> MCC leaders were aware of falsehoods told by the Mennonites staying in their camps during interviews with UN immigration officials.

<sup>12</sup> “C.F. Klassen Files - Refugee Migration, Canadian Government Immigration 1950-52,” IX-19-9, box 2, MCCA.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> E.D. Fanshawe to G.G. Kullman, Aug. 15, 1947, Folder 146, AJ 43 462, Archives Nationales.

<sup>15</sup> Gerard Cohen, *In War’s Wake: Europe’s Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 42.

<sup>16</sup> Aug. 1946, 178 Ms. 37 “MCC News Letters - Different Sections,” Box 6a, Hiebert Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas (hereafter MLA).

**“ MCC leaders were aware of falsehoods told by the Mennonites staying in their camps during interviews with UN immigration officials.”**

The Second World War was over, but the lasting effects of complicity with the Third Reich, whether great or small, played a large role in how MCC approached its immigration work. Unable to reverse any of the decisions made by Mennonites during the war, MCC instead displayed brilliance and political savvy in helping secure Displaced Person status for many of the Soviet Mennonites they helped when other religiously affiliated organizations were unable to. The title “Displaced Person” was the magic ticket that erased, at least on the surface, any detrimental connection to Nazism. Hand-in-hand with an abundance of close-relative Mennonite sponsors, MCC’s success in gaining “Displaced Person” status for these ethnic German Mennonites from the Soviet Union resulted in MCC helping thousands of those Mennonites successfully immigrate to Canada and other countries in the Western hemisphere in the decade following the end of the war.

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## **Defining the deserving: MCC and Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union after World War II**

After the Second World War ended, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) mobilized to help Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union trapped in war-torn Europe. MCC worked extensively with the International Refugee Organization (IRO) to resettle these refugees in Canada and South America. In January 1953, MCC was surprised to learn that the IRO had prepared a manuscript accusing it of misleading IRO officials about the background of Mennonite refugees. The manuscript also claimed that MCC had attempted to bully the IRO, using its connections with the governments of the United States and Canada, into processing Mennonites even though they were ineligible as *Volksdeutsche* who had voluntarily taken German citizenship and had, in “a large number . . . served in the German army, the *Waffen-SS*, [and] the German Security Police.”<sup>1</sup> MCC’s William T. Snyder complained to George Warren of the U.S. State Department: “One scarcely knows where to begin . . . because [the report] is built on the foundation that the Mennonites helped by IRO were not eligible for that help and that the Mennonite Central Committee was part of a diabolical scheme to withhold information from the IRO officials.”<sup>2</sup> For Snyder, it was more than simply MCC’s reputation on the line. He was worried that MCC’s ability to help future refugees from Eastern Europe could be derailed if the IRO’s interpretation became part of the historical record.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Mennonites,” unpublished International Refugee Organization (IRO) manuscript, volume 1325, folder 957, Mennonite Heritage Archives (hereafter MHA), Winnipeg.

<sup>2</sup> William T. Snyder to George Warren, January 28, 1953, volume 1325, folder 957, MHA. Also quoted in T. D. Regehr, “Of Dutch or German Ancestry? Mennonite Refugees, MCC, and the International Refugee Organization,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (January 1995): 18.

<sup>3</sup> William T. Snyder to C.F. Klassen, January 23, 1953, volume 1325, folder 957, MHA.

MCC leaders did not waver publicly or in internal correspondence from their original position that Mennonites should have been considered eligible within the IRO framework. And while they felt fully confident that their documentation supported this position, they acknowledged that complications existed. C.F. Klassen, who represented MCC in negotiating eligibility issues in Europe, admitted that some of the refugees had lied to IRO officials, while others, so scarred by their “horrible experiences . . . began to believe their own made-up stories.” Despite these cases, Klassen contended that he always told the refugees “to tell the examining officers the truth and leave the arguing to us.” He also showed no regret, insisting that “in retrospect, I can say that I waged an honest fight against ignorance, prejudice, stupidity, and not seldom, even wickedness of IRO officials.”<sup>4</sup>

In reality, refugees from the Soviet Union, at the heart of this dispute, were not well understood by either MCC or the IRO. The IRO’s insistence that Mennonites voluntarily left the Soviet Union, received German citizenship and joined the military arm of the regime, imposed on Mennonites an ideological sympathy with the Nazi regime. Such a position failed to account for the brutality of war zones, even for people occupying a higher rung on the Nazis’ racial ladder. It also minimized Mennonite treatment by the Soviet regime, specifically, the internal deportation of over half the Mennonite population before the arrival of the German occupying forces during the war. As many Mennonite refugees believed that reprisals would follow once the Soviets reoccupied the land, it is not surprising that they objected to the term “voluntary” as describing their 1943 exodus from the Soviet Union and their subsequent actions.

MCC, however, also had its own shortcomings in understanding the displaced Soviet Mennonites for whom it advocated. As it presented its case to the international community, MCC enlisted the help of historians to argue that Soviet Mennonites were Dutch in origin, politically neutral and identified more closely as Mennonite than with any nationality. These arguments, however, did not describe those who had lived under the Soviet regime during the 1930s and the subsequent Nazi occupation. In reality, Soviet Mennonites had a complicated relationship with nationality, having been registered as “Germans” under the Soviets and as *Volksdeutsche* under the Nazis. They also had a complicated relationship with Mennonite identity, having lived under an atheist state that actively persecuted religious believers. Finally, they had a complicated relationship with power. Under both the Soviet and the Nazi regimes, some Mennonites grabbed leadership opportunities, accepting morally repugnant tasks, including victimizing other Mennonites through Soviet’s policy of dekulakization and facilitating the murder of Jews and other groups targeted for genocide by the German occupying forces.

As they carried out their primary task of resettling Mennonite refugees, MCC workers on the ground in post-war Europe began to question the

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<sup>4</sup> C.F. Klassen to William T. Snyder, January 28, 1953, volume 1325, folder 957, MHA. There has been some debate on C.F. Klassen’s attitude towards Jews. See Benjamin W. Goossen, “Nazi Denialism Must End,” *Canadian Mennonite* (September 25, 2017): 10 and David Giesbrecht, “A Response to Ben Goossen: Was C.F. Klassen an Anti-Semite?,” *Roots and Branches* 24/2 (June 2018): 16–18. The question of Klassen’s views and their potential influence on MCC’s work needs to be fully researched.



From an internal MCC questionnaire, 1949. Nazi officials had installed Heinrich Wiebe as the mayor of Zaporizhzhia (population ca. 300,000) after they captured the city in October 1941. He remained mayor there until the end of 1942. During this period, Wiebe was involved in the expropriation of the property of the city’s Jews and their ghettoization. A Nazi death squad shot numerous Jews in the city in the autumn of 1941, but as many as 3,700 remained alive until the spring of 1942. At that time—while Wiebe was still mayor—the city’s security apparatus, which included local Mennonite leadership, executed the remaining Jews. After the war, Wiebe served as one of the most influential “representatives” (*Vertrauensmänner*) of the Mennonite refugee community to MCC and other aid organizations or governmental offices. He met with leading MCC officials and helped coordinate MCC’s work with thousands of Mennonite refugees from Soviet Ukraine. (MCC photo)



Distribution of MCC food supplies to around 1,000 Mennonite refugees in Backnang camp, 1947. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

**“ Although seemingly without intention to cover acts of atrocity committed during the Nazi period, MCC gave license for Soviet Mennonites to minimize or erase the different ways they had collaborated with and benefited from the Nazis.”**

character of the people under their care.<sup>5</sup> At a meeting in early of January 1948, key MCC workers in Germany—C.F. Klassen, Siegfried and Margaret Janzen, Elfrieda Klassen Dyck and Peter J. Dyck—decided to introduce moral screenings to ensure that only “good Mennonites” immigrated to Paraguay. According to the committee, people who were “anti-Church, anti-Bible and anti-Mennonite” should not be eligible. This committee was particularly worried about the commitment to the Mennonite religious tradition of people of mixed marriages and of people who had expressed support for either the Communist or the Nazi regime. In the latter cases, however, they decided a person’s past could be expunged if “guilt has been admitted and a renewal of life pledged before not less than five fellow Mennonites and the MCC/VM [*Vertrauensmänner*] committee.”<sup>6</sup>

The questionnaire of Heinrich Wiebe shows the type of information MCC wanted to know from the applicants. Wiebe recalled Elfrieda Klassen Dyck and Siegfried Janzen communicating to the refugees that “each head of the family now had to fill out a large questionnaire ‘truthfully’ . . . According to these questionnaires, the camp residents were now examined and sorted.”<sup>7</sup> Wiebe’s interview, conducted in April 1949, revealed that both his parents were Mennonite and that he had been baptized in 1907, belonged to the *Kirchliche* Mennonite denomination and had attended church in the Soviet Union until 1929. Wiebe also attested that he was married in the church (not separated), did not serve in the army, did not join the SS, was not a member of the Communist party, did not join the National Socialists and became a German citizen in 1943 under duress.<sup>8</sup>

This type of screening demonstrates that MCC adopted an understanding of who “the deserving” refugees were that was formulated not on the basis of IRO eligibility criteria, but rather within MCC’s own moral framework. While this is not surprising, it also helps to explain why MCC did not necessarily view the coaching of refugees in their interaction with outside parties, which did take place, negatively.<sup>9</sup> It also helps to explain why MCC placed communist and Nazi collaboration on the same footing in their assessment of refugees. Both, according to this framework, constituted a betrayal of the Mennonite faith and community. And both, theoretically, could also be forgiven.

Even with MCC’s tolerance, refugees had a strong incentive to remain silent or conceal the truth in order not to jeopardize their applications for

<sup>5</sup> This was before MCC’s renewed fight with the IRO over Mennonite eligibility in March 1948. See William Snyder to Cornelius Krahn, March 12, 1948, volume 1325, folder 957, MHA.

<sup>6</sup> Minutes of January 4, 1948, volume 1369, file 1366, MHA. Also see Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (University of Toronto Press, 2000), 105. The *Vertrauensmänner* were trusted representatives from among the Mennonite refugees who were present during interviews with the MCC committee.

<sup>7</sup> Heinrich Wiebe to J.J. Thiessen, June 8, 1949, volume 1364, folder 1316, MHA.

<sup>8</sup> Allgemeiner M.C.C. Fragebogen, IX-19-16.2, box 1, MCC U.S. archives, Akron, Pennsylvania, (hereafter MCCA).

<sup>9</sup> Henry H. Winter, *A Shepherd of the Oppressed: Heinrich Winter, Last Ältester of Chortitza* (Wheatley, ON: self-published, 1990), 149.





Mennonite refugees packing up to leave an MCC-operated camp in Germany for Canada. They were among the 12,000 displaced Mennonites MCC helped migrate to the Americas in the decade after the Second World War. Ca. 1948. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

immigration. And while the Mennonite refugee community appears to have demonstrated a willingness to report on communist collaboration, particularly those Mennonites whose roles as informants had contributed to the Great Terror, they were more reticent about those who had participated in Nazi crimes. Wiebe's file, for instance, contains a certified statement from two other refugees attesting to his character when he served as mayor of Zaporozh'e under occupation: "We confirm that during his short term of office Mr. Wiebe protected the interests of the people as their dutiful representative and took part in no National Socialistic movements."<sup>10</sup> In reality, German and Soviet documents confirm that Wiebe had directed the implementation of Nazi racial policies in Zaporozh'e, which included persecuting the local Jewish population.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, with the help of MCC, Wiebe would receive permission to immigrate, with his wife Olga, to British Columbia in Canada.

After the end of the Second World War, MCC provided aid and a future to 12,000 Mennonite refugees. MCC approached this work within its own moral framework based in Mennonite religious and cultural values. Although seemingly without intention to cover acts of atrocity committed during the Nazi period, MCC gave license for Soviet Mennonites to

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<sup>10</sup> Certification in Lieu of Oath, July 30, 1950, IX-19-16.4, box 23, file 13/8, MCCA.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, "Report about the Inspection of the Administration in Zaporizhia," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum RG-11.001M.0092.00000346; Martin Dean, "Soviet Ethnic Germans and the Holocaust in the Reich Holocaust in the Reich Commissariat Ukraine," in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, ed. Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 248–71; Benjamin W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Aileen Friesen, "A Portrait of Khortytsya/Zaporizhzhia under Occupation," in *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, ed. Mark Janzen and John D. Thiesen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 229–249.

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minimize or erase the different ways they had collaborated with and benefited from the Nazis.

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## National Socialism and MCC's post-war resettlement work with Danziger Mennonites

The experiences of Soviet Mennonites during and after the Second World War have received significant scholarly attention, especially when compared to limited academic examination of Vistula Delta Mennonites (hereafter referred to as Danzigers) during this period. In this essay, I examine the work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) with the Danzigers in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, particularly how MCC whitewashed the Danzigers' German nationalism and acceptance of National Socialism in order to garner favorable treatment for them from Allied authorities and international refugee bodies. At base, MCC considered all Mennonites as purely victims of the war who deserved special treatment. When it came to the Danzigers, MCC painted a picture of them being a unique, separate and innocent group and, depending on the situation, made shifting claims about the Danzigers' national identity, sometimes asserting that Mennonites transcended national affiliation while other times claiming that these Mennonites were Dutch or German. While creating narratives of innocence and victimhood and acting on their implications, MCC workers actively avoided honest assessment of Danziger (and other) Mennonite collusion with National Socialism.

Days before the Soviet Red Army arrived in Danzig and West Prussia in January 1945, 20,800 Mennonites (including 12,000 from Ukraine) managed to escape by boarding ships in the Danzig harbor destined for the German island of Rügen and Denmark, or by fleeing overland to western Germany. They ended up in displaced person (DP) camps in the British zone of occupation in western Germany or in refugee camps in Denmark.<sup>1</sup> Many others lived in bunkers, unheated attics, pig pens, furnace rooms and army barracks in Germany.<sup>2</sup> MCC established numerous refugee camps in Europe, two of which were in the British zone and housed (or at least registered) 5,094 Danziger refugees: a camp at the Dutch-German border town of Gronau (est. 1946) and Espelkamp (est. 1947). About 1,500 Danzigers were in the state-administered Danish camps (assisted by an MCC unit, established in Copenhagen in April 1946). The 210 Mennonites who maintained residence in the Vistula Delta came under the care of MCC workers stationed at Pelplin, Poland, in 1946. Still others were stationed briefly at the International Refugee Organization (IRO) camp at Fallingsbostel in northern Germany (est. 1947), where MCC workers assisted in the refugee screening process.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Wie viele Mennonitenflüchtlinge in Europa?" *Der Mennonit* 4 (April 1948): 31.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Brunk, *Espelkamp: The MCC Shares in Community Building in a New Settlement for German Refugees* (Frankfurt: MCC Press, 1950), 9.

<sup>3</sup> "Wie viele Mennonitenflüchtlinge in Europa?" 31.

MCC workers who were working with the Allies and international aid and refugee organizations were challenged by the fact that Germany's National Socialist government had classified the Danzigers as pure-blooded Aryan Germans. Danzigers had enjoyed all the privileges of that status and had participated in the Nazi onslaught on Europe and its brutal occupation policies.<sup>4</sup> Rather than addressing this highly problematic situation head-on, MCC workers devised strategies that would avoid dealing with it, benefit the Mennonite refugees and make MCC work to resettle the displaced Danziger Mennonites easier. In 1948, MCC worker William Snyder revealed the MCC stance vis-à-vis the Danzigers when writing to Mennonites in the United States and Canada. Snyder bemoaned the fact that "Our Danzig and East Prussian brethren are not considered eligible for governmental assistance due to the fact that they are looked upon as 'German nationals'" and stated that "MCC is seeking to assist them [because they were] victims of the war."<sup>5</sup> This mentality factored into all MCC work with the Danzigers, and with all Mennonite refugees in Europe. Regarding the Mennonites' wartime affiliations and actions, MCC workers attempted to convince the IRO of the innocence of all Mennonite refugees. In 1946, one of MCC's leaders in refugee work, Peter Dyck, wrote a letter to the IRO that reflected the connection between establishing Mennonite innocence and the ultimate goal of Mennonite resettlement. Dyck claimed, dubiously, that Mennonites had "consistently endeavored to put into practice . . . nonresistance (strict pacifism)," and that "Mennonite refugees are undoubtedly a remnant of a distinctly characterized people, a 'Volk', which is neither Russian nor German."<sup>6</sup> After failing to recognize, in offering his "considered opinion" to the IRO, the Mennonite position and privilege in the Nazi system (amongst other things), Dyck stated that categorizing Mennonites outside of European nationalities was "nothing more extraordinary than that which is constantly and everywhere done in the case of the Jews."<sup>7</sup> Instead of being German, Dyck stated, "they call themselves 'Mennonites' by nationality and have only one desire, to emigrate to Canada or Paraguay where they can join their relations and apply their labor to the land."<sup>8</sup>

However, the dual claim of European Mennonite commitment to nonresistance and transcendence of national identity did not line up with the facts, a reality MCC administrator Siegfried Janzen acknowledged—albeit only through allusion—in an MCC circular to displaced Mennonites. Janzen provided Mennonite refugees with the proper answers to standard IRO questions, encouraging Mennonites to fudge the truth about their German identity:

How should I answer the question about nationality? . . . this question should be answered with 'Mennonite.' And as a result, the person in

<sup>4</sup> See Benjamin W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> William Snyder, *Mennonite Refugees: Whose Responsibility?* (Akron, PA: MCC Press, 1948): 3.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Peter Dyck to IRO Officials, "Mennonite Refugees in Germany, July 1946," IX-19-3, "Basel Relief Unit, Germany," file 1/26, MCC archives in Akron, Pennsylvania (hereafter MCCA).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



Workers in MCC camp in Gronau, Germany, processing displaced Mennonites from the Danzig region for departure to Uruguay, 1948. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC photo)



MCC representative in Denmark, Susie Peters, sometime between 1947 and 1949. MCC sought to help Mennonites from Danzig who had left Poland and were in refugee camps in Denmark after the war. (MCC photo)

question will be processed in a preferential way. In any case, one should not check off ‘German’ or ‘ethnic German.’ In this case one might also forget one’s citizenship papers. We do not wish to answer the questions with a partial truth and lie, but we want to maintain the old [biblical] principle: yes is yes, no is no.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time that he was claiming in IRO correspondence that Mennonites had no national affiliation, Peter Dyck sought to transform displaced European Mennonites into being Dutch in order to achieve their safe passage for them into the Netherlands, which made it possible for them to board ships bound for South America. This work included collaboration with Dutch pastor Teerd Oeds Hylkema, who convinced Dutch officials of the Mennonites’ Dutch ancestry.<sup>10</sup> Peter Dyck, who had brokered the agreement, printed 5,000 Menno Passes and issued them, after a brief impromptu interview, to Mennonite refugees at the German-Dutch border. This method proved successful as a few thousand Mennonites entered the Netherlands beginning on December 22, 1945, until the Dutch government invalidated the Pas in June 1946.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the IRO initially believed MCC claims about the Danzigers’ (and other Mennonites’) innocence during wartime, until it discovered in 1948 that Mennonites had embraced National Socialism. The IRO immediately considered changing its emigration policy for Mennonites, which Peter Dyck discovered at a refugee eligibility conference, held in Geneva in early January 1949. Dyck reported that the IRO had “passed over 6,000 of our people [Mennonites]” in emigration proceedings, and stated that MCC could “clean up the lot” of about 400 remaining Mennonite emigration cases, hoping that the IRO would “let the remaining few go through and thus finish up our work here.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, the IRO followed through with a report in July 1949 that many Mennonites had served in “reprehensible units such as the *Waffen*

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<sup>9</sup> Circular from MCC worker Siegfried Janzen, April 25, 1947, titled, “Rundschrieben Nr.2 Liebe Fluechtlingsgeschwister in Deutschland,” IX-19-9, “Refugee Migration January 1947–1948,” file 1/78, MCCA.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Kreider reveals how MCC workers used Horst Penner’s research on Mennonite ancestry, particularly the lists of Mennonite last names he had compiled, to convince the Dutch government of the Russian Mennonites’ Dutch heritage. See Kreider, *Interviews of Peter and Elfrieda Dyck: Experiences in MCC Service in Europe, 1941–1949* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1988), 216. See also official government correspondence from M.R. Thomas, B.O.A.R zone eligibility officer to regional eligibility officers, “Information Circular Number 9—List of Mennonite Family Names,” IX-19-9, “Refugee Migration, January 1947–1948,” file 1/78, MCCA. The Mennonite names listed were of Dutch or east Frisian origin. See also “List of Mennonite Family Names,” November 7, 1947, IX-19-9, “Refugee Migration, IRO, 1947–March 1948,” file 2/5, MCCA.

<sup>11</sup> Kreider, *Interviews*, 93. The agreement came to an end in June 1946 after the Russian consulate in Holland reminded the Dutch government that 12,000 Dutch POWs remained in Russia. The Netherlands closed the border to Mennonites but did not repatriate the 450 Soviet Mennonites who were in the Netherlands at that time. See Kreider, *Interviews*, 102.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Peter Dyck to C.F. Klassen, January 16, 1949, IX-19-9, “Refugee Migration 1947–1948,” file 1/74, MCCA.



SS and the *Sicherheitsdienst* (security forces).<sup>13</sup> The IRO halted MCC emigration work three months later.<sup>14</sup> This frustrated MCC workers, but it did not engender critical reflection among them in relation to the reason for the change in policy. MCC director C. F. Klassen stated in 1950: “The MCC cannot do much at this point in terms of emigration for the Danziger and Prussian Mennonite refugees, that these so far have been banned from IRO assistance. Only 500 Danzigers have been able to gain assistance to emigrate to Uruguay.”<sup>15</sup> It seems that MCC workers would employ almost any tactic to realize their goals of gaining privileged treatment for Mennonite refugees.

In Denmark, the conditions allowed for, and even encouraged, Danzigers to whitewash their embrace of National Socialism and view themselves as being victims of the war. Arriving in Denmark in 1946, MCC workers—led by C.F. Klassen and Walter Gering—found that Danziger Mennonites were scattered throughout thirty-four overcrowded camps that were surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards, and where they received barely enough food to survive.<sup>16</sup> Even though MCC workers in Denmark seemed to acknowledge the questionable wartime actions of the Danzigers, the unit’s report only stated passively that “our people in Europe have been subjected to ways of life and thinking during the past generation which have brought about a weakening of their testimony.”<sup>17</sup> MCC unit director Elma Esau reported that the Danish government was fully supportive of realizing MCC’s goals, including finding homes abroad for the Danzigers, even if this meant circumventing the IRO’s restrictions on German nationals. Esau’s report revealed that Mennonites could leave Denmark directly, without having to go to mainland Europe and undergo IRO scrutiny and policies.<sup>18</sup> In this advantageous context, C. F. Klassen organized the emigration of a group of Danzigers to Paraguay on April 15, 1948, on the ship *Johan de Witt*.<sup>19</sup> That same year, MCC organized the transport of hundreds of Danzigers from Denmark to Uruguay: in 1948, 751 Danzigers boarded the Volendam ship for Uruguay, and in 1951, 430 more followed.<sup>20</sup>



Some of the 210 Mennonites who remained in Poland following the Soviet defeat of German forces. After the war, MCC operated a unit in Pelplin, Poland, that, among other tasks, assisted these Mennonites. (MCC photos)

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Myer Cohen (Assistant Director-General, Health, Care and Maintenance Department, IRO) to the IRO Eligibility Officer, July 23, 1949, IX-19-9, “Refugee Migration – IRO, July 1949–September 1952,” file 2/7, MCCA.

<sup>14</sup> Myer Cohen to IRO Eligibility Officer, September 10, 1949, “Eligibility of Mennonites,” “Refugee Migration – IRO, July 1949–September 1952,” file 2/7, IX-19-9, MCCA.

<sup>15</sup> Circular from C.F. Klassen, “An Unsere Danziger Flüchtlinge,” 1, June 1, 1950, IX-6-3-43, “MCC Inter-Office Correspondence, 1950,” MCCA.

<sup>16</sup> “Denmark Unit Report, December 1-4, 1946,” IX-19-9, “Refugee Migration, Denmark, 1945–1948,” file 1/72, MCCA.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Denmark Unit Report of 1947, MCC Unit Director, Elma Esau,” quoted in Horst Gerlach, “Mennonite Central Committee and the Fate of Mennonites in East Prussia, West Prussia, and Poland at the End of World War II,” *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* 11/2 (April 1988), 26.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from C.F. Klassen to T.J. Gillingan, Chief, Exit and Entry Branch, British Zone of Occupation, 1, IX-19-9, “Refugee Migration, Denmark, 1945–1948,” file 1/72, MCCA.

<sup>20</sup> Gerlach, 27.

MCC's work in refashioning Mennonite identity took a very different shape in Poland, where MCC's work included insisting on the Germanness of the Mennonites who remained in Poland and even transforming non-German Mennonites into Germans in order to gain privileges for those Mennonites.<sup>21</sup> Wilson Hunsberger, who led the 25-member MCC team in Pelplin, Poland, claimed that the Gdansk/Danzig area was "among the most needy areas" in Poland and thus focused MCC work in the Vistula Delta, particularly around Neuteich and Elbing, which he reported had been "45% Mennonite before the war."<sup>22</sup> The thinly-veiled effort to maintain Mennonite presence in the Vistula combined with MCC's other main goals of providing relief, being a Christian influence in the region and saving Soviet Mennonites from repatriation. Hunsberger negotiated successfully with the Polish Department of Labor and Social Welfare in 1946 to establish a food distribution program and an "agricultural-tractor-training program" at a farm called Rolin in Pelplin, just south of Gdansk/Danzig. MCC worker J. Alton Horst explained that this farm initiative was part of an attempt to rehabilitate "some Mennonite families who have taken Polish citizenship papers with the idea of re-establishing a church and mission activities there."<sup>23</sup>

**“ Hanging over the Mennonite refugees in Poland was the fact that over half of them were not German citizens, but of Soviet origin, which marked them for repatriation to the Soviet Union.”**

The Mennonites in the Vistula Delta totaled 210, including 23 Russian, 133 Polish and 36 German citizens: these Mennonites were all considered *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) by both the Polish government and the MCC. MCC worker Menno Fast explained that Mennonites were forcibly removed from their land and imprisoned or forced to work in labor camps without remuneration, due to their Germanness.<sup>24</sup> Hanging over the Mennonite refugees in Poland was the fact that over half of them were not German citizens, but of Soviet origin, which marked them for repatriation to the Soviet Union. In fact, Stalinist policies threatened all the Mennonites in Poland, as Germans were seen as enemies of the state.<sup>25</sup> MCC workers succeeded in convincing the authorities that all the Mennonites were German, and obtained exit permits for these distinctly "German Mennonites" from Prussia, Soviet Ukraine and Poland through Poland's Director of German Affairs on May 19, 1948.<sup>26</sup> In December of that year,

<sup>21</sup> See "Denmark Relief Unit Report, 1-4 December 1946," and letter from W. Snyder to H. Bender, December 9, 1947, IX-19-9, "Refugee Migration, Denmark, 1945-1948," file 1/72, MCCA.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson Hunsberger, "Report for Basel Conference, August 12-13, 1947," 1, IX-19-3, "Basel Relief Unit, Poland - W. Hunsberger 1947," file 1/93, MCCA.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from J. Alton Horst to John Horst, March 16, 1948, IX-19-3, "Basel Relief Unit, Poland, 1948," file 2/31, MCCA.

<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Polish repatriation officials, Menno Fast requested exit visas for 'Germans.' See Menno Fast's letter titled, "A Report on Our Work among the Mennonites in Poland, April-June 1948," May 19, 1948, IX-19-3, "Basel Relief Unit Poland, 1948," file 2/32, MCCA.

<sup>25</sup> In 1948, MCC worker N. Emerson Miller claimed that all Mennonites in the area (including Soviet Mennonites) were "distinctly of the German race and wish to hold to their German culture." "Present Conditions of the Mennonites in Poland, 1948," IX-19-3, "Basel Relief Unit, Poland, 1948," file 2/32, MCCA.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Jaroszuka, chief delegate of the Ministry of Recovered Territories of the Polish Republic, May 25, 1948, cited in Menno Fast,

Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Stanislaw Radkiewicz, set as a goal “to frustrate all action on the part of enemy agencies.”<sup>27</sup> With this notice, the remaining Danziger Mennonites were forced to leave Poland because of their German nationality by April 30, 1949; the MCC workers who had supported them were also deported at this time.<sup>28</sup>

The end of MCC work in Poland wrapped up a campaign that saw a lot of significant relief that impacted thousands of people positively. However, the rhetorical strategies MCC deployed to help uprooted Danziger Mennonites secure immigration privileges fostered numerous related ideas that would affect the ability of Mennonites to reflect critically on their collaboration with the Nazis during the war. In fact, MCC workers themselves became entangled with National Socialism’s legacy by encouraging Danzigers to whitewash the past. MCC helped to fashion Danziger self-understanding on these points in their history. By 1950, the opening of foreign lands to wartime German nationals further served in distancing the Danziger Mennonite-Nazi affiliations, as German Mennonite immigrants (including Danzigers) assimilated into Canadian society.<sup>29</sup> In a circular distributed by MCC to the Canada-bound Danziger refugees in 1950, C.F. Klassen encouraged them to examine themselves vis-à-vis their recent past in this way: “anyone who was lukewarm to Mennonitism in the past and maybe even hostile in the Nazi era should seriously examine himself before God and then clarify his matter with his community leaders, otherwise he should refrain from applying for Canada.”<sup>30</sup> This type of reference by MCC staff to European Mennonites’ past complicity with Nazism was uncommon, weak and basic. MCC workers highlighted the importance of recovering or re-establishing Mennonite principles, as in this statement from a 1946 report from the MCC relief unit in Denmark that worked with displaced Danziger Mennonites: “today they begin to look forward to a future in which these [Mennonite] sacred principles may again be re-established . . . and dedication to the historic position of our forefathers.”<sup>31</sup> MCC workers viewed the more overtly Nazi-supporting Danzigers as having lost their way religiously—which was only addressed vaguely—and that the best



Jantzen, Mark. *Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion, and Family in the Prussian East, 1772–1880*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

Schroeder, Steven, “Mennonite-Nazi Collaboration and Coming to Terms with the Past: European Mennonites and the MCC, 1945–1950.” *Conrad Grebel Review* 21/2 (2003): 6-16.

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“A Report on Our Work among the Mennonites in Poland, April-June 1948” and letter from Menno Fast to Siegfried Janzen, September 3, 1948, IX-19-3, “Basel Relief Unit, Poland, 1948,” file 2/32, MCCA.

<sup>27</sup> See Norman Davies, *God’s Playground: A History of Poland* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), Vol. 2, 550. Speech of Minister Radkiewicz, “Bulletin, Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” in IX-19-3, “Basel Relief Unit, Poland, 1949,” file 3/72, MCCA.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from J. Alton Horst to Robert Kreider, April 6, 1949, IX-19-3, “Basel Relief Unit, Poland, 1949,” file 3/72, MCCA.

<sup>29</sup> While MCC sponsored the emigration of 284 Danziger Mennonites—who joined 467 East European Mennonites—from Europe to Uruguay in October 1948, most Danzigers had to wait for their “exodus” until 1950. See Emma Schlichting, “Mennonite Migrations, 1945–1949” (term paper, Goshen College, 1988), appendix, and Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, MB: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1962), 390.

<sup>30</sup> C.F. Klassen, “An unsere Danziger Flüchtlinge,” 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Denmark Relief Unit Report, 1-4 December 1946,” 2, IX-19-9, “Refugee Migration, Denmark, 1945–1948,” file 1/72, MCCA.

antidote to this was to re-Christianize them, i.e., to have them become better Mennonites.

As MCC narrated its post-war humanitarian assistance and migration work with Danziger and other uprooted Mennonites, the complexities and ambiguities of those efforts fell out in favor of telling success stories, and in remembrances of God's faithfulness. When asked in 1988 about whether MCC should "let sleeping dogs lie" in relation to the entanglements with Nazism of the European Mennonites MCC helped to migrate after the war, Peter Dyck stated, "Why not? But [the matter at the time] was a nuisance really."<sup>32</sup> Instead of tackling the Mennonite entanglement with National Socialism, MCC workers focused on the familiar and comforting aspects of spiritual reflection. When Dyck addressed a group of Mennonites at a 1989 meeting in Chilliwack, British Columbia, about MCC's work with Mennonite refugees, he encouraged them "not to forget the wonderful leading of the Lord, but to pass their stories on to their children and grandchildren."<sup>33</sup>

Danziger Mennonites were very much "of the world," including a variety of war-time collaborations and complicities with the German Nazi regime—MCC's humanitarian efforts with these Mennonites after the war were in turn not straightforward matters of assisting pure victims. This issue of *Intersections* represents an important step in telling MCC's work with the Danziger Mennonites in a more complete and complex way. Unsettling accounts of an exodus-like rescue of Mennonite victims by MCC and acknowledging the ways in which Danziger (and other European) Mennonites collaborated with Nazism during the war are essential for historical truth-telling. Such truth-telling is also vital if Mennonites of European descent are to grapple with how their communities in the Americas have also been very much "of the world," bound up with and benefiting from colonialist ventures. May this issue of *Intersections* spur MCC and Mennonites more broadly to reckon with how Mennonites have not transcended "the world" but in fact have been and remain entangled in enduring systems of oppression.

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<sup>32</sup> Kreider, *Interviews*, 360.

<sup>33</sup> Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up from the Rubble* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 99.



**Like most escaped prisoners, Jacob Luitjens acquired a false ID and tried his luck in a refugee camp. He settled temporarily in Backnang, an MCC-run camp for refugees with Mennonite backgrounds."**

## **MCC's resettlement of the Dutch war criminal Jacob Luitjens**

This article traces the story of the Dutch war criminal, Jacob Luitjens, whom Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) helped to emigrate from post-war Europe to Paraguay in 1948 and on whose behalf MCC appealed to the Canadian government in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent his extradition to the Netherlands in the late 1980s.

Luitjens' war-time story unfolded within the broader context of Germany's occupation of the Netherlands, which began in May 1940 after a five-day battle. The Dutch royal family and the ministers of the Dutch government



went into exile in the United Kingdom. The Netherlands was governed by German officials, not by military officers like in Belgium. The Dutch people, with the exception of Dutch Jews, were categorized as a German ‘brethren’ nation or *Volk* by Nazi ideologues and not mistreated like the Slavic people in the east. The Dutch Nazi Party (NSB) collaborated closely with German authorities in the ensuing war years.

The German occupying forces did not desire confrontations with the church, be it Roman Catholic or Protestant. If the churches did not meddle in political affairs, they were left alone, but if they tried to protect Jews (including baptized Jews), there would be trouble. A small minority of Dutch ministers were openly pro-German, embracing the National Socialist cause, including five of the 65 Mennonites ministers in the country.

Jacob Luitjens was born in 1919 in the Dutch East Indies, now the Republic of Indonesia, to a Dutch Reformed father and a Mennonite mother. In the thirties, the Luitjens family returned to the Netherlands, where the father became a veterinarian in Drenthe, a poor province on the German border. Jacob went on to study law at the University of Groningen. During the war, Jacob, like his father and his younger brother Pieter, actively collaborated with German authorities. The brothers Luitjens were members of the notorious Voluntary Auxiliary Police Corps, or *Landwacht*, and participated in *Landwacht* units that hunted down and killed resistance fighters and people who were hiding from the Germans, including Jews. Jacob, as an intellectual, also produced propaganda.

After the liberation of the Netherlands from German occupation in May 1945, Jacob Luitjens, his brother Pieter and their father were imprisoned, along with more than 100,000 people who were accused of treason or assisting the enemy. Jacob was held in Camp Westerbork in Drenthe, which had infamously functioned during the war as a transit camp for more than 100,000 Jews sent by Germany to the death camps in the east.

After a year in the camp, Jacob escaped to Germany with another inmate, Bert Postma, the brother of Mennonite minister Johan Sjouke (called Joop) Postma. Joop Postma, born in 1910, had a Mennonite father and a Dutch Reformed mother. A student of the history of the Mennonites in Russia, he had become an ardent anti-communist and an open partisan of National Socialism. Two of Joop Postma’s brothers were similarly strong proponents of National Socialism, while another was an active resistance fighter who was executed by the Germans. Imprisoned, tried and sentenced as a war criminal, Joop Postma managed to escape to Germany.

Like most escaped prisoners, Jacob Luitjens acquired a false ID and tried his luck in a refugee camp, where he met Postma, also carrying a false ID. They both settled temporarily in Backnang, an MCC-run camp for refugees with Mennonite backgrounds. Jacob wanted to go to Canada and applied via MCC, but because he had a deformed arm he was rejected. He then approached the International Refugee Organization, again via MCC, and was approved for emigration from Germany to Paraguay.

On May 16, 1948, Jacob sailed under the name Gerhard Harder from the Bremerhaven port on the SS *Charlton Monarch*, with more than 750 emigrants under the direction of MCC. On board he met Olga Klassen from Soviet Ukraine, whom he married.

Learn  
more

Hoekema, Alle G. “Dutch Mennonites and Yad Vashem Recognition.” In *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*. Ed. Mark Jantzen and John Thiesen, 250–268. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020.

Post, Pieter. “Dutch Mennonite Theologians and Nazism.” In *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*. Ed. Mark Jantzen and John Thiesen, 153–171. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020.



Elfrieda Klassen Dyck (right) meets with a Mennonite refugee woman from the Soviet Union at an MCC office in the Netherlands. Klassen Dyck led MCC’s relief support with displaced Soviet Mennonites in the Netherlands following the Second World War. Ca. 1946. (MCC photo)

In Paraguay, Luitjens initially worked as a teacher in Menno colony, but later moved to Fernheim and then Neuland. At the end of 1949, Luitjens was baptized under his false name—we do not know if he openly confessed his past to the congregation. Four months after Luitjens sailed from Bremerhaven, he was tried in the Netherlands *in absentia* and received the very severe sentence of life imprisonment.

In 1951 or 1952, Luitjens reverted to his real name and became a citizen of Paraguay. At the same time, he continued attempts to move to Canada. For entry into Canada, Luitjens needed official proof of birth—that represented a problem, as he was still wanted by Dutch authorities. With the help of Mennonites in his home town of Roden he obtained his papers, and in 1962 he entered Canada with his wife and three children. Luitjens settled in Vancouver, where he taught introductory biology at the University of British Columbia. He joined First United Mennonite Church in Vancouver and in 1972 acquired Canadian citizenship.

However, within ten years everything changed. It came to light that Luitjens was still on the wanted list—the Netherlands asked the Canadian government for his extradition. The request was not straightforward, as “helping the enemy” was not one of the items on the relevant extradition treaty from 1903. Canada had developed a reputation as a haven for former Nazi war criminals. The Canadian government was thus sympathetic to the extradition request, seeking to change the country’s image. The Canadian government proceeded to strip Luitjens of his Canadian citizenship and in November 1992 he was put on a flight to Amsterdam, where he was arrested and imprisoned. Dutch officials reduced his life sentence to six years—Luitjens ended up spending half that time in prison. Luitjens was set free at the age of 75 at the end of March 1995. He was stateless and unable to travel back to Canada.

Luitjens was the last Dutchman in a Dutch prison for war crimes committed during the Second World War. Joop Postma, for his part, stayed in South America until 1957, when he returned to the Netherlands and spent three weeks in a minimum-security prison. As if nothing had happened, he became a Mennonite minister again.

Luitjens and Postma were not the only Nazi war criminals one who escaped Europe with MCC help, but their history is well documented. Luitjens himself felt at peace with his actions, telling a Canadian court that he had confessed to God and God had forgiven him. During his extradition proceedings, several Mennonite churches and church bodies worked unsuccessfully to prevent his return to the Netherlands. Luitjens’ home congregation, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, MCC British Columbia and MCC Canada’s Ottawa Office advocated that Luitjens be allowed to stay in Canada, calling for mercy and pointing to Luitjens’ good reputation in his church and community. A Canadian Member of Parliament responded that “we owe it the families of those who may have been murdered as a result of Luitjens’ alleged complicity with the Nazis” to deliver Luitjens to face justice. In the Netherlands, meanwhile, Luitjens became a symbol in the 1990s of Dutch complicity with Nazism, receiving the nickname “the Terror of Roden.”

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Hans Neuman, a Mennonite refugee from the Soviet Union, assists with a MCC clothing distribution in post-war Netherlands. The Dutch-language sign reads: “These goods are sent to you as a love gift ‘In the Name of Christ’ from Mennonites in the United States and Canada.” Ca. 1946. (MCC photo)

## Hands under the cross: MCC and the post-war construction of German Mennonite peace identity

When Dirk Cattepoel attended the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Goshen, Indiana, in August 1948 as a representative of the German Mennonites, he highlighted the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) logo of the time, with clasping hands under the cross, as a symbol for a new beginning for global Mennonite fellowship following the Second World War. The task for the post-war future, Cattepoel argued, should be to find common understanding amidst the colorful diversity of Mennonites worldwide. Commonality and unity under the cross!<sup>1</sup>

But which characteristics of the Mennonite faith could and should create unity? MCC played an essential role in answering this question, imprinting itself on the memory of German Mennonites after 1945 not only through its relief efforts, but also through its tirelessness in reconstructing Mennonite identity in Germany. This reconstruction involved the constructive recovery of a German Mennonite commitment to peace. However, while the post-war period saw some limited German Mennonite confession of the church's collaboration with and silence in the face of Nazism, MCC's public focus in its engagement with German Mennonites was officially not on pressing the church to critically come to terms with this past complicity and silence (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) but instead on fostering a renewed German Mennonite identity for which a recovered peace testimony would be vital.

In the first issue of the MCC-produced journal, *Der Mennonit*, in January 1948, MCC chairman P.C. Hiebert addressed the “scattered Mennonites of the world.” He pointed out how much Mennonites had diverged globally over the course of the past centuries. Each group had thought of itself as the “only real Mennonite.” In the post-war era, a new unity based on mutual understanding would be needed, Hiebert argued—and MCC should act as a “mediator” and “servant” in the construction of such unity.<sup>2</sup> One of the ways that MCC sought to foster such inter-Mennonite unity and understanding was through the publication of two journals: *Der Mennonit* sought to disseminate theological ideas among German Mennonites, while *Unser Blatt*, which began publication in October 1947, communicated to and connected scattered German-speaking Mennonite refugees.

MCC was realistic about the challenges of fostering global Mennonite unity. In 1948, Harold S. Bender pondered whether Mennonites from all countries and continents were indeed “one congregation” at all. His answer was sobering. Theologically and culturally, Bender reflected, such great gaps had developed that “greater unity” would require placing oneself “on the ground of the broadest tolerance.” Bender was skeptical regarding this premise, but, he suggested, greater unity could be nurtured through Mennonite



MCC logo on a postcard commemorating an MCC-organized German Mennonite youth conference, Backnang, Germany, August 8–9, 1947. (From MCC archives)

**MCC's material and spiritual aid gradually contributed to the rebuilding of German Mennonitism and a new understanding of inter-Mennonite togetherness."**

<sup>1</sup> Dirk Cattepoel, “Eindrücke von der Weltkonferenz,” *Der Mennonit* (1948), 75.

<sup>2</sup> P.C. Hiebert, “An die zerstreuten Mennoniten der Welt,” *Der Mennonit*, (1948), 3.

World Conference assemblies and through an emphasis on a common peace testimony.<sup>3</sup>

Action followed: in the summer of 1948, Europeans participated in the fourth Mennonite World Conference assembly held in Goshen, Indiana, and Newton, Kansas. At the assembly, the German Mennonite representatives—Dirk Cattepoel from Krefeld and Emil Händiges from Monsheim—first had to publicly face up to the recent past. They reflected on the Nazi years and also addressed in great detail the plight of West and East Prussian refugees. Cattepoel asked for forgiveness for all the suffering that had been caused in Germany’s name and called for a “new beginning.” Cattepoel’s confession and plea for forgiveness doubled as an explanation of the German Mennonite church’s stance during the Nazi years: “Nazism did not approach us with concentration camps, religious persecution, extinction of the mentally ill, and gassing of the Jews; but with the motto, ‘Freedom and Bread!’ with a program for political and economical reconstruction, with social measures for the working classes, with a splendid welfare organization, and with a youth work doing justice to all the idealism of youth.”<sup>4</sup> Cattepoel left the World Conference assembly struck by the strong emphasis on defenselessness and nonresistance.



Displaced Mennonites from the Soviet Union in Backnang camp, Germany, reading the first issue of the MCC-produced publication, *Der Mennonit*. May 1948. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

### Defenselessness

“Thank you very much for the invitation to the mission festival in Kaiserslautern—but unfortunately I cannot come because I have to fulfill ‘military obligations.’” This was the apology of a Swiss Mennonite missionary in September 1947 to the mission festival’s organizers.<sup>5</sup> It reflects the challenges MCC faced to bring the idea of peace back to Europe and to unite Mennonites worldwide in the “testimony for peace and rebuilding.”<sup>6</sup>

By the time the Nazis came to power, German Mennonites had become integrated citizens positively disposed towards armed military service. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the traditional Mennonite emphasis on nonresistance had been pushed farther and farther into the background. In the 1934 Constitution of the Mennonite *Vereinigung*, nonresistance no longer played a role as an obligatory element of faith. Even after 1945, there were regions in Germany where the idea prevailed among Mennonites that war was a necessary evil, as Harold S. Bender noted with disappointment in 1948.<sup>7</sup>

But attitudes gradually changed among European Mennonites following the war. For Bender, Switzerland had developed into the model country for promoting the idea of peace, surpassing even the United States, whose Mennonite citizens he warned not to be lulled into “complacency.” Bender

<sup>3</sup> Harold S. Bender, “Unsere Weltmennonitengemeinde,” *Der Mennonit* (1948), 10, 19 and Bender, “Die Friedenstätigkeit der Mennoniten,” *Der Mennonit* (1948), 86ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Fourth Mennonite World Conference Proceedings* (Akron, PA, 1950), 15.

<sup>5</sup> C.03, Mappe 6, document from September 5, 1947, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Weierhof Bolanden, German (hereafter MFSt).

<sup>6</sup> Harold S. Bender, “Die Friedenstätigkeit der Mennoniten,” 87.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



also appreciatively observed that in Germany and France, a change in thinking related to nonresistance and peace was gradually taking place, while in the Netherlands a movement was growing which completely rejected military service (the *Vredesgroep*). The West Prussian Mennonite refugee communities in Denmark had also adopted a consistently nonresistant attitude. So European Mennonites, from Bender's perspective, were heading in the right direction—in Bender's assessment, European Mennonites' own history would "oblige" and "empower" them for the work of peace.<sup>8</sup>

The ideas of nonresistance and peaceableness were transported to German Mennonites via multiple paths. *Der Mennonit* carried many articles on the subject. MCC also organized lectures and conferences on the themes of nonresistance and peace. Prominent MCC leaders shared messages about peace theology with the German Mennonite public, including Bender, Hiebert, Robert Kreider, C.F. Klassen and Peter Dyck. Service programs initiated by MCC, such as the International Visitor Exchange Program and Pax, also served as channels for sharing new understandings of peace and inter-Mennonite unity.

What did MCC leaders mean when they promoted "nonresistance"? At the Basel Faith Conference in August 1947, H.A. Fast defined nonresistance as a "way of life and love" and as a "faithful following of Christ." It was "not a doing nothing" nor a "standing aside," but active work—nonresistance did not entail seclusion and withdrawal from society. Cornelius J. Dyck, in a 1947 lecture in Kiel, defined nonresistance as a "fruit of the teachings of Christ," which included a "daily surrender of self, of turning the other cheek, of going the second mile." Bender, meanwhile, committed his brothers and sisters in faith to the "way of non-resistance," which he explicitly distinguished from a "humanitarian pacifism." The latter trusted only "in human wisdom and goodness." In contrast, Mennonite peace was a "work program" that "first makes people Christians and then peacemakers." Bender recognized that the "total war" which he saw as the normal form of war in the twentieth century presented Christians with a special challenge. Nonresistance was no longer simply a matter of fighting for exemption from military service, but of communicating a positive testimony to the public and training Christians in nonresistant discipleship through suitable alternative service.<sup>9</sup>

Some Mennonite leaders raised cautions about the emphasis on peace as part of renewed Mennonite identity. H.A. Fast, a Mennonite leader from the U.S. who had provided leadership in the Civilian Public Service program during the war, clarified that nonresistance could never be the center of Mennonite faith and life—that was to be Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> The Ibersheim Mennonite preacher Abraham Braun, for his part, warned against making

**“ The task for the church [according to the Thomashöfer Declaration] would now be to assist church members who, for reasons of conscience, refused to serve in the armed forces. The declaration was primarily forward-looking, with minimal critical engagement with German Mennonite actions and silences under Nazism.”**

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>9</sup> H.A. Fast, "Die Wehrlosigkeit unter den Mennoniten von Nordamerika" *Der Mennonit* (1948), 11; Bender, "Die Friedenstätigkeit der Mennoniten," 86, 88; Peter Dyck, lecture manuscript, A.23, Mappe 1, March 14, 1947, MFSt.

<sup>10</sup> H.A. Fast, "Die Wehrlosigkeit unter den Mennoniten von Nordamerika," 11.



MCC leader, C.F. Klassen, preaching at MCC's camp in Gronau, Germany, for displaced Mennonites. Ca. 1947–1948. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

the idea of peace a dogma.<sup>11</sup> Some years later, at December 1952 MCC meeting at Thomashof chaired by C.F. Klassen, some participants expressed concern that the emphasis on nonresistance threatened to become a “polemic,” with fears named that nonresistance would be pushed too hard on the church’s youth and declared to be a “doctrine of non-resistance,” an article of faith.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mutual (including spiritual) aid**

MCC’s humanitarian aid work in post-war Germany operated under the umbrella of the Council of Relief Agencies Licensed to Operate in Germany (CRALOG)—while MCC was the smallest CRALOG agency, it handled around 25% of the relief aid deliveries. MCC relief workers not only viewed it as an obligation to operate through CRALOG—channeling relief assistance through CRALOG, argued Walter Eicher in his capacity as MCC representative to CRALOG in the Palatinate, allowed MCC workers to be more objective in their assessment of individual distress (and thus less influenced by the subjective appeals from individual Mennonites).<sup>13</sup> Participating in CRALOG helped MCC navigate the repeated cases of

<sup>11</sup> C.03, Mappe 10, undated letter, ca. 1950, MFSt.

<sup>12</sup> C.11, Mappe 225, notes from 1952 MCC meeting at Thomashof, Germany, December 20, 1952, MFSt.

<sup>13</sup> C.03, Mappe 6, letter from July 31, 1947, MFST.

receiving applications for assistance from people who submitted false information.


MCC distributed assistance to German Mennonites via the CRALOG mechanism, but also more broadly within post-war Germany. However, over the course of the late 1940s, MCC placed increasing emphasis on the distribution of spiritual literature among German Mennonites and appointed a traveling preacher. MCC's material and spiritual aid gradually contributed to the rebuilding of German Mennonitism and a new understanding of inter-Mennonite togetherness. First "for you," then "with you"—that is how C.F. Klassen described the evolution of MCC's work with German Mennonites at a December 1951 meeting of the Mennonitische Zentralausschuss.<sup>14</sup> Alongside spiritual outreach to and with German Mennonites, MCC workers contributed to the physical reconstruction of German Mennonite life. Through MCC financial support and the efforts of MCC Pax workers, MCC by 1951 had helped rebuild or construct seven Mennonite church buildings, in addition to 30 houses near Neuwied, three houses in Frankfurt and two homes for the elderly. Further house construction, meanwhile, was planned for Espelkamp, Backnang and Lübeck.

While physical rebuilding moved ahead, there was also sand in the gears of the attempts to "rebuild" inter-Mennonite unity, with MCC criticizing German Mennonite leaders Benjamin Unruh and Michael Horsch. Unruh had been active in relief work for Mennonites in the Soviet Union since the 1920s and was the preeminent political advocate among German Mennonites, including during the Nazi era. Unruh remained the contact person for Mennonites from the Soviet Union in Germany after 1945, which led to disputes between MCC and Unruh over roles and authority. MCC excluded Unruh from many aspects of its work with displaced Soviet Mennonites. Unruh in turn complained about the lack of brotherhood and openness, as well as the unreliability of U.S. Mennonites. Not everything was being done "in the name of Jesus," Unruh lamented.<sup>15</sup> As early as 1947, MCC representatives hoped that Unruh would soon retire, but then decided to support his activities financially for a few more months.

MCC's worries about Michael Horsch, meanwhile, revolved around accusations of corruption in Horsch's distribution of MCC aid packages. Specifically, MCC accused Horsch of prioritizing distribution of relief aid to people who paid him, with one MCC worker claiming that Horsch "arranges the sending of packages so he will get a nice amount of 'spende' in return."<sup>16</sup>

### **Hands under the cross**

Another milestone in MCC communicating the idea of nonresistance to German Mennonites took place at the Thomashof near Karlsruhe in June 1949 at a meeting that brought together representatives from both

 **MCC's work of fostering inter-Mennonite unity, as captured in the hands under the cross in its logo, was never easy, for even when outstretched hands met in a handshake, each and every individual still had to respond and follow up with action."**

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<sup>14</sup> Glück, Mappe 225, notes from MCC meeting with German Mennonite leaders on December 17, 1951, MFST.

<sup>15</sup> Unruh, Mappe 23, letter from September 8, 1948 und 20.9.1948; Braun, Mappe 6, letter from July 31, 1947, MFSt.

<sup>16</sup> MCC, Mappe 3, letter from Walter R. Eicher to Robert Kreider, March 22, 1949 – 0609; and letter from Harold S. Bender, May 27, 1949, MFSt.

MCC and German Mennonites. At the end of the meeting, the participants issued the “Thomashöfer Erklärung [Declaration],” which proclaimed that nonresistance had once again become “an obligation” for the signatories due to the “heritage of the fathers” and the “testimony of biblical truth.” The task for the church would now be to assist church members who, for reasons of conscience, refused to serve in the armed forces. The declaration was primarily forward-looking, with minimal critical engagement with German Mennonite actions and silences under Nazism.

*Der Mennonit* commented on the statement, recognizing that although the declaration from Thomashof represented a significant development, much work remained to be done. “One should not believe that the German Mennonites as a whole at Thomashof have devoted themselves to non-resistance—not at all,” the author wrote, continuing that the declaration did not mean that the doctrine of nonresistance “has again found free course among the German congregations.”<sup>17</sup> MCC’s work of fostering inter-Mennonite unity, as captured in the hands under the cross in its logo, was never easy, for even when outstretched hands met in a handshake, each and every individual still had to respond and follow up with action. MCC called German Mennonites to service and witness “in the name of Christ”—yet then, as now, the meaning of that call was open to interpretation.

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<sup>17</sup> *Der Mennonit* (1949), 57.

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