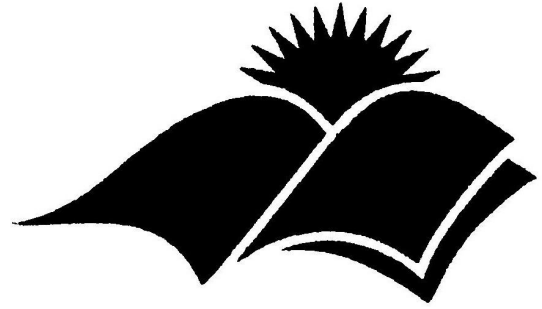


# Historian



Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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Hours are 9:00 a.m. until 12 noon, Monday to Friday, holidays excluded

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Edited by Jill Nicholson

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## Silk Industry in the Ukraine

By Jill Nicholson

The first Mennonite settlement in Russia was Chortiza in the Ukraine, established in 1789. The settlers came from the Danzig area of Germany upon the invitation of Catherine II. At the time, there was a feeling of uneasiness among the Mennonites due to the poor economic conditions in Germany and particularly their position in the regions of West Prussia after the annexation of Poland. The first settlers were craftsmen and small manufacturers. Domestic industry was in general limited to wool spinning and weaving for many of the immigrants had been weavers in Danzig. Some of these weavers moved to Molotschna after hardships in Chortiza.

By 1819, the nearly treeless tract had been planted with 30,000 fruit trees, 35,000 other trees, 1,000 grapevines, and about 25,000 mulberry trees, since the silk industry after 1810 had become a lucrative side line. In the 1830s and 1840s demand increased, and silk factories were established under the leadership of Johann Cornies, the representative of the government in the colonies, who was himself a resident of the Molotschna settlement. To develop this industry on a large scale, he built a school in Ohrloff to instruct the girls of the colony in the art of silk reeling. But in the end, it proved impossible to reel the silk with the available help, and, in addition the silkworm plague and strong Italian and French competition, damaged this industry as a viable commercial enterprise. Due to these factors, grain production became the most important crop of the immigrants.

Although the large-scale commercial cultivation of silkworms ended, the residents of some Ukrainian Mennonite colonies continued to raise them as a cottage industry. Because the work was done by women and children and because there was no

additional outlay of funds to continue, silk was spun to be used for clothing made for special occasions such as christenings. In addition, the silk could be traded for goods from itinerant traders.

Louise Block, 94 years young, recounts the process used at her home for silk production which was done by the women of the household. Silk worms were raised in the house's attic. A number of silk worm eggs were kept over the winter. In the spring, the eggs hatched and silk worms fell on to the paper on the floor of the attic. The ravenous silk worms were fed mulberry leaves that were taken from the trees on the property. A couple of former colony residents remember the distinct sound of the worms munching on the leaves in their houses. The worms then developed their cocoons. After about four weeks, the cocoons were boiled and a single thread of pure silk was harvested. Some moths were allowed to hatch and lay eggs for the next year.

From the stories told by our members, once the silk has been spun into a workable yarn and dyed, the women knit it into garments such as socks. Louise Block and other members of the EKMHA community own children's silk socks which were created in the early twentieth century.

The silk industry in colonies such as Chortiza and Molotschna had short-lived commercial viability due to outside trade influences, but it continued to flourish to help the settlers celebrate special life events and as an additional source of income to help support the family ■

## Johann Cornies, a Biography

Johann Cornies was born at Baerwalde near Danzig, Prussia on June 20, 1789 to Johann and Aganetha Cornies. The family migrated to Russia in 1804. After a two-year sojourn at Chortitza, the Cornies family joined the new colony on the banks of the Molotschna, where they took over a homestead of 175 acres in the newly settled village of Ohrloff. Young Cornies began work as a labourer for a miller at Ohrloff for a year, and then three years he marketed farm produce from the settlement in the near-by cities of Simferopol, Feodosiya, and Sevastopol.

In 1811 Cornies married Agnes Klassen and the following year bought a homestead at Ohrloff and erected buildings. He soon recognized the favourable opportunities which the steppes presented for all kinds of agriculture, and began to breed sheep, renting the fallow-lying government lands for grazing. Cornies eventually raised cattle and horses and cultivated both grain and trees. By 1847 his own livestock consisted of 500 horses, 8,000 sheep, and 200 head of cattle of Dutch stock.

Besides a 1,350 acre estate (with 9,000 acres leased from the government) on the Yushanlee River given him by the Czar for his contributions to agriculture, Cornies purchased Taschenak, an estate of 9,450 acres near Melitopol; and ten years later another estate, Verigin, bordering on it, so that he was finally cultivating about 25,000 acres.

The government soon took note of Cornies' large-scale achievements. By 1817 it had made the 28-year-old Cornies lifelong chairman of the Society for the Effective Promotion of Afforestation, Horticulture, Silk-Industry and Vine-Culture. The settlers of Chortitza also founded an agricultural society in which Cornies became influential by virtue of his position as authorized (governmental) agent over all the Mennonites. Cornies worked at establishing industry, agriculture and forestry in the area. Cornies also trained Russians in agriculture, through the government. He invited Hutterites to the area and helped the government settle the nomadic Nogais people.

Cornies particularly insisted that the educational system of the Mennonites was in need of reform. In 1818 he founded the Society for Christian Education, which built its first secondary school in Ohrloff in 1820. He also began a library and created a reading circle. Until 1843 the schools of the Mennonites in Russia were controlled

by the Church. As there were no trained teachers, farmer-teachers instructed the children. That year the schools were placed under the Society for Christian Education which was to co-operate with the church leaders. Cornies divided the Molotschna settlement into six school districts, planned for the improvement of the school buildings, dismissed a number of the most incompetent teachers, and insisted upon regular school attendance.

Cornies achieved more than any of his contemporaries in the realm of cultural and economic advancement among the Mennonites in Russia. In dealing with the opposition of religious leaders, ignorant farmers, or personal opponents he could be ruthless.

That he was able to carry through his mighty reforms in spite of opposition was due to the fact that as a representative of the authorities, he was endowed with almost unlimited powers and that he was self-sacrificing and upright in his dealings. A warm feeling of good will and a superb calmness marked his relationships with people. In spite of his great wealth and influence Cornies remained a plain Mennonite farmer. He died at the age of 59 on March 13, 1848 ■

*(Excerpts from the Mennonite Encyclopedia taken from the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg)*



# The Broken Violin by Henry Pauls

Place: a Mennonite Village in South Russia

Time: About 1800

Johann loved to play his violin – he played German folk songs, nature and love songs. But he also played religious hymns from the church songbook, Gesangbuch. Some people spoke against him; they said playing a violin was too worldly. It leads to pride and pride is a sin! Our community is divided and people quarrelled. Johann, you have to stop it.!

Johann was deeply disturbed – he loved his violin, but he also wanted to live in peace and in harmony with his people.

It was a mild May evening and Johann was playing again. Suddenly two men came: “We cannot have peace in our community, so we will take away the violin!”

In his excitement, Johann jumped up, smashed his violin over a fence-post: “Now you can’t take it.” He sank back into his chair and shouted: “It is not a sin, no matter what you say!”

It was getting late and a cold breeze came. His wife called: “Johann, you will catch a cold, better go to bed!” She gave him a heavy blanket. It was clear – Johann had a fever. All summer he suffered. At that time, people did not know, but later generations claimed it was malaria. Many people suffered from malaria fever at that time. He could do very little work all summer.

The nightingales left and winter came. Johann had to stay in bed. In a small overheated room, no ventilation – the people in their ignorance meant it good. Everybody would bring some medicine, homemade. Chicken noodle soup was considered to be specially good. Home made teas, good for almost any sickness.

One man came – he had something in his hand. “This always helps – I use it on myself. And if my boy claims he is too sick for school, all I have to do is reach for the high shelf. Right then the boy is cured, ready to go to school.” What he had in his hand was a wooden tube, about 10 inches long – highly polished. Inside the tube was a steel spring, a handle on one end, and a plug full of sharp needles in the other. By pulling the handle back and releasing it, the spring snapped back. Here was a stopper, so the needles could only prick the skin. It was called a “Lebinswecker”, a life arouser. It was widely used at that time. But with Johann, it did not help.

At last, spring came and warm weather, sunshine. Johann was sitting near the front door, enjoying the warm sun. The two men came again, but now they asked for forgiveness. “Maybe we made a mistake, maybe it is not a sin?” And his neighbour came, that was the carpenter Dyck (Deocha Dyck) and he gave Johann his violin back, all glued together again. He was a master craftsman and he had made the violin whole again – brought it back to life.

Johann’s wife had carefully gathered all the pieces. Now Johann could play again, better than before. It has been said: a violin is like a living soul – every time it is broken and then glued together again by a master, the quality of its tone is improved. It certainly was with Johann and his violin. He would take the high notes, clear and pure, to sing to the glory of God.

“High above all the stars, there is God in all his majesty and he is a God of mercy! Are you in need? Are you troubled? Come – trust him. He is the God of grace and mercy. Trust him – his mercy has no limits, no end!” Johann and his violin held the high notes and the nightingales loved it They called to each other from bush to bush, from valley to valley. The echo in the valleys repeated it. As if all nature was taking part in praising God, the God of grace and mercy.

And the young people loved it – more and more they came. Johann started to teach them. He played the violin, they learned and memorized the songs and the verses ■



Courtesy: Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, MB

## Henry Pauls, a Biography

Henry B. Pauls: farmer and artist; born 28 September 1904 in Chortitza, Ukraine to Bernhard and Helena (Epp) Pauls. He was the second child in a family of two sons and four daughters. On 1 July 1937 he married Sara Hildebrand. They had four sons and two daughters. Henry died 5 May 1995 in Leamington Ontario.

While growing up in Russia Henry pursued an education that qualified him to enter the teaching profession. Henry had an early interest in painting as he often talked about his teacher, Mr H. Dick who taught him the basics of painting and in 1915 left him with a watercolor painting of a scene in Russia. Henry cherished that painting and carried it with him through his many moves.

When the difficult times came, Henry, his parents and siblings were forced to pull up roots and move to Canada. Because of the new language and customs it was clear his ambition to be a teacher would have to be put on hold. Henry and Sara purchased property in the Sonningdale area of Saskatchewan, built a log home and gradually built up a mixed farming operation. In 1949 Henry and Sara decided to pull up stakes and move to Ontario primarily because they felt schooling opportunities would be better in Ontario.

Henry and Sara and their five children settled in the Leamington area of Ontario and developed a new farming operation based on production of cash crops like tomatoes, tobacco, strawberries and asparagus. Soon a sixth child was born. While operating the farm Henry's mind was often on Russian Mennonite history as demonstrated by his frequent correspondence with Dr. David Rempel, a cousin and professor in that field at the College of San Mateo in California.

In 1987 the Pauls retired from farming and rented the land to a neighbor and friend in the area. Soon after retiring from farming Henry felt a need to record as much information as he could about his childhood in Russia. He wrote short stories in longhand and provided copies to their children and grandchildren. The story telling soon developed into recording his

ideas in oil paintings. Henry painted approximately 100 original paintings of his childhood in Russia, pioneering in Saskatchewan and farming in Leamington. Of these paintings approximately 26 paintings are in the National Archives, Ottawa, 25 paintings are in the Mennonite Heritage Center, Winnipeg, and 28 paintings are at Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo. The rest of his paintings were given to family and friends. Henry never received money for his paintings, as he felt privileged to be able to make this small contribution to society. Many of his best stories and paintings were published in *A Sunday Afternoon* (1991).

Most of his paintings of historical significance were completed while living in the farmhouse in Blytheswood. In 1990 Henry and Sara moved to a Mennonite retirement community in Leamington where he lived out his remaining days in peace knowing that his heritage had been recorded for posterity■

(Biography from the GAMEO online Mennonite encyclopedia)



Henry and Sara Pauls

## Cherry-Pit Pie by Margaret Driedger

When Mother was a girl, she climbed trees in a village in the Ukraine. She often spoke of the cherries that would dry on the trees, creating delectable snacks.

When Mother grew up and came to Canada, she married a farmer and gave up climbing trees. Instead, she spent many hours and days at 'stoop-labour', picking the various vegetable crops as they matured. In spite of all the time in the fields, Mother cooked scrumptious meals. Sometimes short-cuts were in order.

One such short-cut produced what became the legendary 'cherry-pit pie.' The cherries were baked in the pie unpitted. The resulting flavour was ambrosial! The pits impart an almond-like flavour, although it is imperative to chew slowly and carefully. The risk of a broken tooth is real, but all of us were spared that calamity. Now Mother's daughter herself is elderly. But still she craves that annual treat. When the Montmorency cherries are ripe, she finds herself in the cherry tree, fending off the robins, to pick at least enough cherries to make one cherry-pit pie. The aroma of the pie baking already begins the process of mental time-travel. Once the pie has chilled, it is ready to eat - no alamide needed. The first bite takes daughters back to youth, her own and her mother's ■

(From Oak Street Leaves, Leamington United Mennonite Church, October 1998)



## In Memory of Astrid Koop by Gisela Schartner

Astrid Gossen Koop, our local historian, church member, wife, mother, grandmother and friend, to name just a few of her roles, was blessed with many talents.

And she was passionate about all of those roles. Tall, slim and always elegantly dressed, she had an eye for beauty and was quite an accomplished artist. That gift was also evident in the numerous quilts she made for MCC or for gifts for friends and family members.

Her family, friends and neighbours particularly enjoyed invitations to her wonderful meals and generous hospitality. A strict vegetarian herself, she made several meat dishes for each meal she served her visitors and regularly made her grandchildren's favourite recipes.

Mennonite history was another of her passions. She was a founding member of the Essex Kent Mennonite Historical Association in 1987 and for more than a decade the editor of the local "Historian" published four times per year.

Whether family or local history, Astrid was always searching out stories and was instrumental in editing or co-editing at least six publications. She spent endless hours listening and transcribing the often heartrending stories of those who had come through difficult times either in Ukraine, Mexico or South America. She was particularly concerned that every branch of the many Mennonite denominations was represented.

Together with her husband Walter, they kept the Heritage Centre a welcoming place for visitors and spared no effort in keeping it clean and attractive.

We are all richer for her legacy of these collections of stories which enable us to better understand each other.

Born on Pelee Island, Astrid had a lifelong fondness for that tiny farm community and often mentioned how much she enjoyed her first nine years and subsequent visits there.

Astrid, we are so grateful for your generous contributions of stories and memories and to Walt and your family for their wonderful support. ■

## Nich dit...Nich daut

Special thanks to the *Historian* team: Louise Block, Walt Koop, Jill Nicholson and Gisela Schartner

Enjoying this newsletter? Help make the next one even better! Send submissions to [info@ekmha.ca](mailto:info@ekmha.ca)

### Upcoming activities at the Heritage Centre

- **Heritage Cafe** runs weekday mornings at 9 a.m.
- First Thursday of every month, visit the **Colouring Cafe** for adults from 9 - 10:30 a.m.
- **Leamington Public Library** visits the Heritage Cafe on the 2nd Wednesday of the month at 9 a.m. Borrow print, audio, and electronic books, as well as music and movies.
- **Crafters Club** occurs the third Wednesday of the month at 9 a.m.
- **Travelogues** begin in November – Check our Facebook page for details.
- Call 519-322-0456 or email [info@ekmha.ca](mailto:info@ekmha.ca) for updates.

## Support Essex-Kent Mennonite history! Become a member of EKMHA or renew today.

Your support helps EKMHA continue its mission of preserving the histories of the Mennonites of Essex and Kent Counties. Membership costs only **\$15/year** for an individual, church, organization, or business. Visit [www.ekmha.ca/membership](http://www.ekmha.ca/membership) to join online or fill out and return the form below ■

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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Membership Fee (\$15 per person/group) \$ \_\_\_\_\_ Donation to Heritage Centre (Optional) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to receive email about EKMHA news and events?  Yes please  No thank you

Are you interested in volunteering 1 hour/month or more?  Yes, send me info  No thank you

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Mission Hall, Pelee Island circa 1930 and 2018