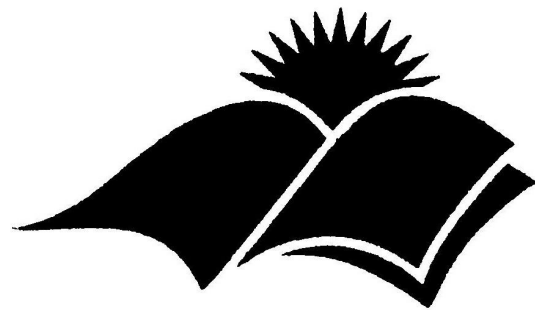


# Historian



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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## Russian Mennonite Architecture

By Jill Nicholson

Mennonite architecture is a topic of some debate. While the plain style is considered to be consistent amongst the various Mennonite groups, a distinctive style for those who eventually immigrated to Russia is somewhat difficult to define. However, the Mennonites who came to the Ukraine from Holland and Northwest Germany were predominately from rural areas so the architecture was expressed initially through dwellings, barns, churches and schools.

The origins of the Mennonite farm village began centuries ago on the lowlands of Prussia. Typical homesteads were organized in long, narrow strips running from higher ground along the river to low-lying marshland. This resulted in multifunctional farm buildings which often included a house, barn and shed joined together with the house closest to the road. The barn was divided into two sections, one for the horses and one for the cows. This joined dwelling was a distinguishing feature of the Mennonite architecture of the time.

After relocating to the Ukraine in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mennonites began settling in villages for protection and ease of sharing labour and tools. The traditional settlement configuration was maintained, but the river was replaced by a central street.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, houses had become larger and both houses and barns were built with highly decorative brick walls. Large ornate gates were located at the street entrances to the farmyards. The large estate owners and industrialists generally abandoned the traditional style of the Mennonite house-barn and many constructed large ornate homes in styles popular throughout Russia and western Europe.

The early Mennonite churches of Russia bore a striking similarity with those of Prussia with the Chortitza

church closely resembling the Heubuden church. The same building was used as a school during the week and for worship on Sunday. Perhaps this is the reason why schools and churches were similar in construction for a long time. The typical church structure before World War I was a long brick building rarely with a steeple but with arched windows still revealing the old pattern.

The Mennonite churches of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century evolved significantly. Their arched windows gave way to Gothic windows in keeping with the trend toward neo-Gothic style church architecture in Europe. The interior of the church also changed from the traditional Mennonite. To reflect the neo-Gothic style, the front platform was placed at one end of the rectangular sanctuary space, the main entrance at the other end and a centre aisle between the two.



The Mennonite Centre, Molokhanok, Ukraine

## Architecture Continued

Also in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dedicated school buildings were constructed. They reflected classical revival styles. School designs were often influenced by estate owners and industrialists who were often involved as board members and financial backers. Mennonite architecture changed to reflect the prosperity of the wealthy businessmen, the change in use and moves to areas with multiple cultural influences.

When the Mennonites from Russia in 1870s and following years went to the prairie states and provinces of the United States and Canada, they continued their architectural traditions with the village structure and with the house, barn and shed under one roof. The Mennonites of Manitoba and Saskatchewan continued to build the traditional plain churches often using the same buildings for schools.

When the next wave of Russian Mennonites arrived in Canada in the 1920's, they moved to more established areas with individual farms or to houses in towns. However, one area where Mennonite building practices could still be seen was in the church buildings. The first Mennonite church in Leamington, the Essex County (now Leamington) United Mennonite Church, was completed in 1934, with faith overcoming the struggles of the Great Depression, "The plan of the church was quite uncomplicated, following guidelines that existed in Russia, except that pointed Gothic windows instead of rectangular ones were used." (The Leamington United Mennonite Church Establishment and Development 1925-1972, p. 44) Additions to the building remained faithful to the Russian practices.

When it was time to build a new church building, like the Oak Street congregation asked itself in the mid-1980s, questions related to the continued adherence to Mennonite traditions, such as simplicity or to turn to the architectural styles found in other local churches such as steeples, stained glass windows or a central pulpit were raised.

Today, Mennonite architecture in North America is now reflected in the old prairie villages of the 1870s and some older existing church buildings■



## Importance of Genealogies by Frank H. Epp

Based on a talk given at the first public meeting of the Genealogical Committee of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario at the Leamington United Mennonite Church, 18 November 1982.

Should people spend time and energy preparing genealogies? Should the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario apply some of its human and monetary resources to genealogical work? My own answers to these questions arose largely as a result of coming to terms with my own family tree. It began, some twenty years ago, with the search for, and correspondence with, close relatives - uncles, aunts, cousins - in the Soviet Union, people whom I had never seen until a representative family group of eleven from Karaganda met us in Alma Ata, the capital of the Kazakh Republic, in the summer of 1976. Then it became personally necessary for me to fit together all the parts of a vast family now scattered not only in Europe and Asiatic Russia but also in the Middle East, Africa, and mostly, of course, in the Americas, both North and South. Actually, my sister, Anna Epp Ens, was already far along in this task, and at a large Epp family reunion at Leamington in 1980 she presented us all with 'The House of Heinrich', a 333-page well-illustrated hardcover book, telling the story of my great grandfather, Heinrich Epp (1811-1863) of Rosenort, Molotschna, and of over 3,000 other persons now linked directly, or through marriage indirectly, to his ancestry. These personal experiences have led me to reflect, not only on my family history but on genealogies in general. In the first place, genealogies have theological meaning. This is true, of course, not just because genealogies are in the Bible but because there is a good reason for their being there. What may that reason be? I find a probable explanation in the doctrine of incarnation, broadly understood. Again and again the Bible reminds us of the manifestations of the divine spirit in space, in time and also in the flesh. The created world, the son of God, the people of God, the kingdom of God on earth are all incarnations of the divine will. Thus, genealogies are a reminder of the fundamental human fact that the children of God are not only spiritual souls but persons of the flesh. And I find it rather interesting that Matthew, begins his gospel with the declaration that his book is "the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" and that Joseph "the husband of Mary of whom Jesus is born" is an indispensable link in that genealogical chain. In other words, for Matthew it was essential that Jesus "who is called Christ" be inseparably linked to the human race

through genealogical continuity. There is an ongoing debate among us Mennonites concerning the merits or demerits of ethnicity in our spiritual pilgrimage and church identity. In this regard, I would suggest that the biblical genealogies and genealogies in general represent some food for thought. Secondly, genealogies have historical meaning. To the extent that we love history we must also be interested in genealogy. ' Genealogies, like chronologies, can, of course, be very shallow histories. Mere dates and facts are at best the skeletal framework of history, and no historian can be satisfied with bones and frames. To these must be added the stuff of historical life, namely flesh and blood, heart and brain, soul and personality. The words of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle come to mind. Said the former, "There is properly no history, only biography." And the latter: "The history of the world is but the biography of great men." A more contemporary version of Carlyle would leave out "great men" because we no longer accept that proper history can be written only in terms of the leaders - monarchs, presidents, prime ministers, generals - but that it must be written also in terms of all the people. Genealogical work can also have broad sociological meaning. The information that is uncovered in family-related research can be quite fascinating and instructive. Consider for instance the great variety of names, including non-traditional surnames, which appear in genealogical research and which speak not of a static but of a dynamic ethnicity. The index of "The House of Heinrich", for instance, reveals a whole new set of beautiful names, which are not a part of the Epp family, names like: Aitchison, Babcock, Bloomquist, Borodawka, Carlson, Coleman, DeVries, Elliot, Foster, Gingerich, Hawkins, Iwanowna, Javonski, Krasnoba, MacInnis, Miedermeise, Orsulak, Rychliwski, Salzman, Szozda, Swanson, Usov, Van de Ham, Wachitewa, Xaxthopaulos, Ysseldyk and Zimmerman. There are many more like that. Religious affiliations produce another wide spectrum: among the Freundschaft are not only all kinds of Mennonites, denominationally speaking, but also all kinds of Christians, as well as persons related to other faiths. The vocational distribution includes virtually all the possibilities ranging from the traditional occupation of farming to freelance artistry try with all conceivable professions and business occupations in between.

Mennonite Historian June 1983 p. 2 (edited for length)

## The Story of the Dishes by H. Fiss

It was in May 1989 when a group of family members travelled with mixed feelings and great anticipation in Poland. We wanted to visit once more the place of our birth, where we had spent our happy, carefree childhood. Memories of the last time we had seen that dear old farmhouse flooded over us. It was on a bitterly cold winter morning in January of 1945 when we were ordered to leave our home and become refugees. Now after 45 years, on a beautiful sunny day, we were on our way back. As our Polish taxi driver drove us to our destination, we anxiously peered out the car windows to catch the first glimpse of our old homestead. The house and barn were still standing but we immediately noticed changes. The huge vegetable garden, fruit trees and well-kept flower beds that had once spread from the house to the road were now replaced by a pasture where two cows grazed contently. A number of chickens and ducks peeked out and waddled around the yard just like I was used many years ago. The house, however, had taken on a different look too.

The windows and roof had been replaced and, since two families now occupied the dwelling, half of it was painted reddish-brown and the other half a greenish-gray. The whole house seemed in desperate need of a new coat of paint. In spite of all this, it was the same house I remembered, and we were very eager to take a closer look.

We waited impatiently in the car while our Polish taxi driver, who acted as a translator, went to the house to ask permission for us to enter the yard. In a very short time he was back and announced that we had been invited to come inside. The Polish owners were very hospitable and showed us around the house and barn. It was a thrill to walk again where had walked so many years ago and to see the rooms where we were born and had played, slept, worked and visited with friends and neighbours.

We were allowed to take pictures and were even invited for coffee (which we had brought along as a gift) with them. As we visited and reminisced, we related how our brother Walter, had helped Mother hide her good dishes in a small room in the basement in the fall of 1944. This room was called "Raeucherkammer" (smokeroom). It had been used to smoke hams, bacon and sausages for our household. I never liked this room. It had a very low ceiling and no windows. We could just barely stand up in it, and a very heavy door opened from the outside only. I had always been afraid that I would be caught in there someday and nobody would find me or miss me.

My mother and brother had dug a huge hole in this room and set a large wooden box inside. There they stacked mother's good dishes carefully into it. After securely closing the lid, they gently replaced some of the soil on top. It was our understanding that we would be returning to our home again after the war was over. Well, my mother never made it back. We emigrated to Canada and Mother died in Leamington in 1988. But she told her grandchildren about this box in the basement of her former home in Poland.

So here we were, back in our old home in 1989, sitting around the table with these very friendly Polish owners. As we told the story of the dishes, our hosts became very interested. In no time, we had a shovel and flashlight in hand ready to investigate the cellar. Suddenly, I found myself in that old dark, scary room holding the flashlight while one of the taxi drivers was eagerly digging with the shovel. The digging was much harder now since the new owners had used this room as a root cellar and the dirt was heavy clay. I couldn't remember the exact spot anymore so we started digging in one corner and were disappointed because nothing was found. We moved to the middle of the room and after just a few spade-fulls of dirt, a piece of wood was uncovered. The excitement intensified. Very carefully, more and more dirt was removed, and one by one the plates, cups, saucers, bowls and platters were rescued from their confinement.

We were overjoyed and immediately began cleaning, washing and scrubbing the new-found treasure. Each piece brought back memories of happy times spent with family and friends over the dinners that our mother had served on special occasions like birthdays, special holidays, baptisms and Braut Fests (when an engaged couple came to be welcomed into the family or circle of friends). After much thought and changing my mind a couple of times, I found the right thing for everyone. As we said good-bye we took one last look at the dishes covering the counter tops and table in the kitchen.

Our children here in Canada were very pleased with the choices I had made. All the pieces have found a special place in the different homes. One even had a little bit of dirt in one corner. Dirt from the land that was tended by our forebearers for about 300 years. Every time we hold one of these pieces, we remember with thankfulness our mother and father and all the others who lived, worked in the beautiful village of Altmuensterberg, near Gdansk.

Oak Street Leaves, March 1995 p. 6 (edited for length)

## Mennonite Genealogy Event – April 4

EKMHA's annual Spring event will take place April 4 with guest speaker John Braun on Mennonite genealogy.



John Braun grew up on a farm near Leamington, Ontario, and after finishing high school enrolled at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg. John is a graduate of University of Waterloo and Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries and has studied at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon. He has had sabbaticals studying at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and Tantar in Jerusalem. He entered the pastoral ministry in 1977 and is married to Velma Wiebe Braun. They have 3 adult children with their partners and one grandson. John has been the leading minister of two congregations, Grace Mennonite Church in Steinbach for 15 years, and Charleswood Mennonite Church for the last 25 years where he retired in the summer of 2019. In the fall of 2019, he responded to a call from conference minister Rick Neufeld, to come to Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg as a part-time interim pastor to offer pastoral care for seniors.

This year, the format for the Spring Event will be different. There will be an afternoon session from 2-4 in the Heritage Centre Auditorium where Mr. Braun and Vic Winter will offer one-on-one sessions on researching your family tree. Half-hour time slots must be booked and there will be fees for printing. In the evening, John Braun will do a formal presentation on Mennonite genealogy research starting at 7 p.m. in the Auditorium. The cost for the evening session is \$20 with a pie and coffee fellowship following.

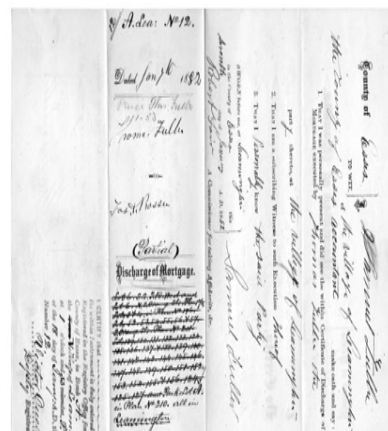
Tickets are available at the Heritage Centre or from board members. Call 519-322-0456 or email [info@ekmha.ca](mailto:info@ekmha.ca) for tickets or more information. ■

## Land Deeds for Leamington, Mersea Township and Pelee Island by Jill Nicholson

The Leamington-Mersea Historical Society has recently completed the indexing of deeds from the 1880's to the 1930s for the areas of Point Pelee, Leamington, Village of Leamington and Mersea Township. Land deeds are an important genealogical research tool. They document the transfer or sale of title or ownership of a piece of land or property from one party to another. They may also list movable or "chattel property" such as household goods.

They can be the only records to state a direct relationship between family members. They can also prove relationships indirectly by studying the land laws in force in time. They can even be used to locate an ancestor's farm or house.

The land deed index and the original deeds can be accessed at the Leamington-Mersea Historical Society's museum location at 121 Essex County 14 in Albana. Appointments can be made by contacting Paul Bunnett-Jones, President, at 519-326-1691. ■



*Nich dit...Nich daut*

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.
- **Mennonite Genealogy Workshops - John Braun and Vic Winter** – Saturday April 4, 2:00-4:00 p.m.
- **Mennonite Genealogy Talk** with John Braun – Saturday April 4, 7:00 p.m.
- **Annual General Meeting** – Friday May 22, 7:00 p.m.
- Call 519-322-0456, email [info@ekmha.ca](mailto:info@ekmha.ca) or check our Facebook page 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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J. P. Tiessen Horse-drawn Tomato Wagon 1929