

## **A Personal Reflection on 35 Years of Migration Work,**

by Bill Janzen, March 23, 2011

Thirty-five years ago, on March 23, 1976, I brought a 17 page letter to Citizenship officials here in Ottawa to ask about allowing some 13 Low German Mennonite families from Mexico, who were then living in southern Ontario, to reclaim Canadian citizenship without having to first become “landed immigrants”.

I wrote the letter at the request of Rev David Friesen from Aylmer, Ontario. He had helped quite a few Mennonites to obtain landed immigrant status but the criteria for that, relating to education, job qualifications, knowledge of English, and other factors, had been tightened a lot. These families were not able to meet the new criteria so they were to be deported. But Immigration officials in London, Ontario, seeing that the people were of Canadian background, had urged David to explore possibilities under Canada’s citizenship law. With that in mind, David called me at the new MCC Ottawa Office.

Citizenship officials in Ottawa took their time but they became sympathetic. In an August 24, 1976 letter, Mr. R. W. Nichols, then Registrar of Canadian Citizenship, wrote: “As a result of your letter of March 23, requesting special Ministerial consideration for a group of Mennonite families from Mexico, who are now back in Canada without status we have undertaken an extensive research program. We have been contacted by the Department of Manpower and Immigration as well as External Affairs. Both of these offices seem to be giving serious consideration to the unique situation resulting from the exodus of Canadian Mennonites to Mexico. For this reason, I would ask you... to bear with us a little longer in an attempt to find a truly satisfactory solution to this difficult situation.”

What emerged early in 1977 was a new policy allowing for “delayed registration” of citizenship. The citizenship law, passed in 1947, stated that children born outside of Canada, under that law, could be “registered” as Canadian citizens if (i) they were born of a Canadian father and in wedlock, or, (ii) failing that, then of a Canadian mother and out of wedlock. The registration was to be done before the child’s second birthday “or within such extended period as the Minister may authorize in special cases.” A few Mennonites in Mexico had registered their children before their second birthdays but most had not. Now the government would let those who otherwise qualified, to register regardless of how old they were.

When the government first opened this “door”, (together with one for people born in wedlock of a Canadian mother) it did so only for a two year period and only if the people indicated in writing that they intended to live in Canada. Still, this door was very significant. I then informed workers in southern Ontario and elsewhere about how to help people make the appropriate applications. Also, in a May 1977 trip to Mexico, I met with

Rev. Heinrich Dyck, the Aeltester in the largest colony. I said that we did not want to encourage people to return to Canada, that we wanted to respect the desire of the churches there to keep their people there, but that we also felt that some were returning anyway, often for reasons of poverty, and that it was better for them, and for Canadian society, if they could then live in Canada with secure legal status.

After the first two years of this “door”, the government agreed on another two years; it did so again and again and again, until 2004. The requirement that people declare an intention to live in Canada was soon dropped, even though we did not ask for that. Before long more workers, in more places, were helping people with applications for citizenship. I did little of that but there continued to be issues that required long submissions in Ottawa.

One issue for which we never found a good solution stemmed from the fact that Mexico recognizes only civil marriages, not church marriages. Since most Mennonites there, from the time of their arrival in the early 1920s to the late-1930s, had only church marriages, many children were technically born out of wedlock. The effect was that quite a few people were ineligible for Canadian citizenship.

Another difficult issue related to the “retention” requirement. The 1977 law stated that certain people born outside of Canada, though eligible for Canadian citizenship, had to go through a retention process before turning 28. Unfortunately, the government did a very poor job of explaining which people were in this category. As a result quite a few ceased to be citizens when they turned 28, even if they had been living in Canada for many years. Getting the citizenship of such people re-instated continues to be an arduous process.

Another issue is that in 2009 the government changed the citizenship law so that now people born outside of Canada can claim Canadian citizenship only if one of their parents was born in Canada. This greatly reduces the number of these Mennonites in Latin America who can obtain Canadian citizenship. Meanwhile the criteria for obtaining landed immigrant status have been tightened further. As a result the flow back to Canada in the years ahead will probably be considerably smaller.

Still, this has been a significant chapter. The total number of those who’ve come to Canada over the years due to these “doors”, together with the children they’ve had here, could well be 60,000. Most have settled in Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta. Not all the effects are positive, either here or in the communities they left, but most of say that here they are better able to provide for their families. Some keep sending money back to family members in Latin America.

When I reflect on this chapter, I’m grateful for the support from MCC, for the friendship of “documentation workers” throughout the hemisphere, for the sense of partnership with

some government officials, for the privilege of having had a hand in matters that meant so much to the people affected, for the support of Marlene, my wife, and for God's sustaining grace.