

Remembering the Hague-Osler Mennonite Migration to Mexico

By Bill Janzen, at the Museum at Hague, Saskatchewan, May 20, 2023

Let's try to imagine the scene here in Hague nearly 100 years ago. Freight cars, perhaps 20 of them, parked on the railway here for a week or so as people loaded their farm equipment, their wagons and buggies, their tools, their household furniture, their kitchen utensils, and clothing, even some farm animals, together with feed for a week-long trip. They will have come with horse drawn wagons, one load after another, from Neuanlage, Hochfeld, Blumenthal, Gruenthal and other villages. They had to take everything they might need to start over in a new land.

Then, with everything packed in and the steam locomotives heated up, people will have said their final good-byes; many would not see each other again in this life. Some of the adults who went had brothers or sisters who stayed; young people, perhaps romantically involved, pleaded with their parents for permission to stay; children said good-bye to neighbourhood playmates; quite a few who at first had planned to move, had changed their minds; some had become too poor, but hoped to follow soon. The many questions and uncertainties will have weighed heavily on people. Nevertheless, in the years from 1924 to 1927, there were six such departures from the Hague and Osler train stations as nearly 1000 Old Colony people set out for Durango, Mexico. Another group of about 200 Bergthalers took a train to New York where they boarded a ship for Paraguay, joining Sommerfelder and Chortitza people from Manitoba going there. (Adolf Ens, Subjects or Citizens, p.214) Years later, one of the people who left, a Mr. Peter Dyck, wrote these pointed words:

Never will I forget those days, weeks and months, of endless trips and many meetings by day and by night. On top of that the enormous expenses and responsibilities incurred, not to mention the ridicule and mockery we had to put up with, flung upon us by our own brethren in Christ. They could not and would not try to comprehend the motive behind this venture. L. Doell, The Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve, p.390

We have come together here, one hundred years later, not to mock and ridicule, but to understand and to show our respect, even though we may not agree. My presentation is long, but I have organized it into sections, hoping that will make it easier to follow: (i) the motivation, (ii) the early tensions, (iii) the clash, (iv) the search for a new country, (v) the move to a new country; (vi) developments after the move; and (vii) Old Colony people on many different paths

I. The Motivation:

Admittedly, it is not possible to know people's motivation exactly, but if we briefly go back to the situation in Russia, just before the 1870s migration to Manitoba, Canada, and look at one young leader, Rev. John Wiebe, we see indications. In 1870, when he was just 33, and already elected as *Ältester* (bishop) in one of the Mennonite colonies in Russia (*Fuerstenland*), he began

to express concern about the changes then taking place: changes in the schools and the interest in higher education; preachers from Germany bringing new theological ideas and new songs known as *Evangeliums Lieder*; colony administrators by-passing ministers and *Ältesters* in their decisions on how to run colony affairs; pressure from the Russian government that the Mennonites begin to teach the Russian language in their schools and that their young men do a national service, even if not military service; and how some Mennonites were becoming very wealthy while others were landless, etc. He felt that these changes were leading the church down the wrong path.

Rev. Wiebe was disappointed that some of older ministers were not as concerned as he was. They agreed that there were problems, but they felt that some of the changes might even have positive sides. He could not see it that way. So, when the opportunity came up to start over in Canada, where the federal government promised them unrestricted religious freedom, he was interested and most of the people in his colony agreed. Rev. Wiebe's colony (*Fuerstenland*), represented only a small minority of the 7000 who then moved to Manitoba. Most were from the *Kleine Gemeinde* or the *Bergthal* colony. But being a small minority did not dissuade him from his understanding of how a church, faithful to the Gospel, should live.

Upon arriving in Manitoba, Rev. Wiebe called a brotherhood meeting. There he outlined how he saw things and then he asked those who agreed to write their names in a register. His plan was for them to settle in villages, rather than on individual homesteads, and for their schools to focus on the Bible, the catechism, the hymn book, and arithmetic, as in the past; they would not let the gap between the rich and the poor get large; there would be a certain uniformity in dress styles in order to prevent individuals from 'showing off;' and in church they would return to certain traditions including a more slow moving singing style. Those who then registered with Rev. Wiebe took the name, *Die Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde*. Before long they were known as the Old Colony (OC) church. (Why this name? The *Fuerstenland* people had only recently come from Chortitza, the oldest Mennonite colony in Russia; hence, in Manitoba, the *Bergthalers* and *Kleine Gemeinde* people who were from different colonies in Russia, referred to the *Fuerstenlanders* as Old Colony people.)

Rev. Wiebe was a sincere and devout person. His vision was for a way of life that would be somewhat communal; not as communal as the Hutterites but also not individualistic; and it would be somewhat separate from the larger society. It was conservative as well as idealistic and based on their faith. (See David Quiring's *The Old Colony Vision*) But it was not quite in harmony with the direction of Canadian society. There would be tensions.

II. The Early Tensions

In the 1870s and 80s there was no public school system in Manitoba. Each immigrant community set up its own schools, in its own language. Soon, however, the provincial government began to offer money to these communities to help them pay salaries for their teachers. In return, the government wanted the teachers to take some training courses in the summer months. Many of the newly arrived Mennonites in Manitoba were happy for this arrangement, but the Old Colonists declined; they would pay their own teachers, of course, they were free to do. Another issue involved municipalities. When the Mennonites first came, they did not exist; the settlers took care of everything by themselves. The Old Colony people preferred it this way; then even their secular affairs could be guided more by their faith and their church leaders. A decade later the government did set up municipalities. The OCs could not prevent this, but their people would not serve as councillors or vote in elections for them.

At the time these were not big issues. The OCs could still continue with their way of life. Naturally, as their families grew they needed more land. Fortunately for them, the federal government at this time wanted to attract settlers to the Hague-Osler area, particularly since it had only recently put down the Metis rebellion at Batoche and built the railway. Thus, in 1895 the federal government agreed to create a reserve here; it set aside a block of four townships, and for three years, only people approved by the OC church leaders were allowed to claim homesteads in these townships. (A few more townships were added later). On that basis the OC Mennonites from Manitoba, including my grandparents, came this area, laid out their villages, built houses, barns, churches and schools, and resumed their way of life. After three years, whatever land was still unclaimed would become available to others. Ten years later, in 1905, the federal government did the same thing for OC people who wanted to settle in the Swift Current area. (See Henry Friesen's, *The Swift Current Mennonite Reserve, 1905-1927*)

It was not long, however, before certain tensions began to sharpen; they involved schooling and they came about in a particular way. Some of these OC settlers here started stores. After all, people needed to buy things. The best place for stores was in towns like Osler, Hague and Rosthern. And the towns soon had public schools. Understandably, these store owners would then send their children to those schools. This was against OC church policy so these people were excommunicated. This meant that other OC people were not to interact with them, or buy things at their stores. From the perspective of the church, excommunication was a form of spiritual discipline; from the perspective of these store owners, it was an economic boycott that threatened their livelihood.

These excommunicated Old Colonists then appealed to the provincial government, saying that it should not allow the church leaders to take steps that led to boycotts. They complained loudly. In response the government, in 1908, set up a formal commission of inquiry. Two deputy ministers came from Regina and held two days of hearings in Warman. About a dozen excommunicated

members came forward to tell their stories, and then Rev. Jacob Wiens, the Old Colony *Ältester*, was called on to explain the policies of the church. He did that by referring to Bible passages (e.g. Deut. 6:7) that emphasized the importance of teaching children about how God wanted them to live. And on the matter of excommunicating people, *Ältester* Wiens quoted New Testament passages about what the church should do when some of its people disobeyed its teachings. (Romans 16:17-19; 2 Thess. 3: 6, 14; 2 John 10) Then Rev. Wiens referred to the promise made by the federal government in 1873 that in Canada they would have unrestricted freedom to follow their faith.

What was the provincial government to do? One step it considered was taking away the right of the OC ministers to officiate at weddings. But it did not do that. Nor did it take away the right of the OC people to run their own village schools. The government at this time promoted public schools, but it did not force them. If local people in a community decided to organize themselves as a school district and to elect school trustees then the government would help them to set up a public school. Many other Mennonites, like those around Eigenheim, Tiefengrund, Waldheim and other places did that. Indeed, one reason why those Mennonites, in 1905, started the German-English Academy in Rosthern, now known as RJC, was to train Mennonite teachers for public schools in Mennonite areas.

Even though the OC people could still run their own schools, the pressure was growing: there was the constant criticism from their excommunicated members, the threat that the government might take away the right of their ministers to officiate at weddings, and more and more public schools were set up in nearby areas. It was at this time, in 1913, that *Ältester* Wiens had a premonition that, as he described it later, maybe they would have to leave everything they had built up here and move to some distant land, 'among a heathen people,' where they would be left alone to live according to the Gospel as they understood it. (Leonard Doell, quoted in Bruce Guenther, *The Ältester*, p.47)

III. The Clash

In 1914, WWI broke out. Now the pressures would harden. Many people in Canada were of British ancestry; they identified with the British Empire and supported the war effort strongly. They now wanted public schools to teach immigrant children about the British Empire and what it meant to be loyal British subjects.

In this context, the Saskatchewan government, in 1917, passed the School Attendance Act. With this law, the government now had the authority to set up public schools in communities even if local people did not want them. It could expropriate land to build schools, appoint official trustees to hire teachers, and if children did not attend then it could impose fines on the parents or even send them to jail. However, before the government began to take actions like that against

OC Mennonites, the Premier, William Martin, came here to Neuanlage and had a personal meeting with *Ältester* Jacob Wiens, presumably with an interpreter.

To seek such a meeting was a significant step. Why did the Premier do that? Was he looking for a compromise solution? He may have. A few years later one OC minister, Rev. Johan Loeppky, wrote these words: “they offered us if we would teach some English in our German school, even if only one hour a day, they would let us have our old ways. Yet we feared this compromise.” (Loeppky Report, Preservings 2006, p 37-40) To us, that unwillingness to compromise appears unwise, but we are not in their shoes; no doubt, those church leaders did what they felt was right. Not long thereafter, Premier Martin took a hardline approach. In the spring of 1918, he sent a stern letter to *Ältester* Wiens saying that they had to make very substantial improvements in their schools, or else the government would set up new schools and force the families to send their children. That hardline approach also applied to the OCs in the Swift Current area. In Manitoba, the government adopted the same policy.

How did these Mennonites respond to this hardline from the provincial governments? They sent a delegation to Ottawa since it was the federal government that had given them that promise of full religious freedom, back in 1873. Would the federal government uphold that promise? Would it tell the provincial governments to back off? The OC delegation was not able to persuade the federal government to do that. A little while later, the very gifted Rev. John P Wall, here from Hochfeld, wrote a long and moving letter to the federal government. (Sept 1918) He explained that they saw it as their Christian duty to obey governments in all matters that did not violate their faith, that they prayed for the government in every worship service, and that they were a hard-working, self-reliant and peaceful people, merely trying to follow their faith; further, that they were deeply grieved that the government would simply break that solemn promise of 1873 without which they would not have moved to Canada. He said he feared they might have to look for a new homeland. This letter, too, failed to persuade the federal government.

In effect the provincial governments now had a green light. They could proceed with their new hardline policies. So, starting in July of 1918, the Saskatchewan government began to build schools. By the spring of 1919 it had eight schools in this area including Pembroke, Venice, Passchendaele, Renfrew, La Bassee, Embury, Steele and Scarpe. (Adolf Ens, p.135). Attendance was compulsory for anyone living within three miles of a public school.

Most OC parents, however, did not send their children. Teachers came day after day and only a few children showed up; in some places no children came. As a result the government began to impose fines. This happened in Blumenheim where my mother was a child, and also in Neuanlage where my father grew up. These fines continued for many years. (Sadly, some of the officials imposing the fines were other Mennonites, and there is evidence that some of them took

more money from the people than the law actually required. (Leonard Doell, Preservings, Fall 2022, p.21) The financial burden became very heavy.

When it became clear, in the summer of 1919, that the provincial governments, here and in Manitoba, were determined to force people to send their children to public schools, the OCs from all three settlements, Swift Current, Manitoba, and here, made the decision to look for a new homeland. It was a huge decision. It was not yet 50 years since they had first arrived in Canada.

IV. The Search for a New Country

In August 1919, a delegation with two men from each of the three settlements set out for Latin America. They had two objectives: a large block of land because they hoped to live together; and assurances of religious freedom that included exemption from military service and the right to run their own schools. These delegates were away for nearly four months.

One unexpected development in that trip was that while they were in Brazil, one of the delegates, Rev. Johan Wall from this area, got sick, died and was buried in Curitiba, Brazil. One hundred years later, in 2019, Dick and Kathy Braun from Osler went to Curitiba for a little ceremony to mark the 100th anniversary of his death. Aside from this personal tragedy there was a deep disappointment for the group: the main purpose of the trip was not achieved. Large blocks of land were available, but the governments in these countries were not willing to give them the very broad religious freedom that these groups wanted.

Then someone heard about possibilities in Mississippi and Alabama and Louisiana. So, early in 1920, they sent delegations to those areas, but that did not work out either; then some inquired about prospects in northern Quebec and northern Manitoba, but again there were issues. Then a certain Mr. John Wiebe, a Mennonite Brethren businessman from near Swift Current who had connections with officials in Mexico, suggested that country. Some were skeptical, but people from the Hague-Osler settlement were willing to check it out. So, a few men from here headed off to Mexico. What they heard from officials there was encouraging. There was hope.

Then, early in 1921, a delegation from all three OC settlements went to Mexico. They talked with senior officials and then met with the President of Mexico. He liked what he heard, but he hesitated when he learned that they did not plan to teach the Spanish language in their schools. (Loeppky Report, Preservings 2006, p 37-40) However, the President's hesitation about the language issue was outweighed by his desire to get farming people into northern Mexico. The reason is that Mexico had just come through a long and devastating civil war. The fighting in northern Mexico had been so bad that many people there had been killed or moved away. Now the government desperately wanted to attract farming people to that area. Thus, on February 25, 1921, President Alvaro Obregon signed a letter addressed to these OC Mennonite delegates promising them all the religious freedoms they had asked for. (Sawatzky, They Sought a Country,

p.39) One of the delegates in that meeting was Rev. Johan Loeppky, then a young minister from this area,

Can we imagine the relief when the news of that promise reached the people in these three settlements? It was over 18 months since they had made the decision to leave. There had been many set-backs. Sending the delegations to distant places had cost huge sums of money. Paying the school fines here had become an ever heavier burden. And the delay had led more people to doubt the whole idea. But now, with this written promise from the President of Mexico, they could plan and move forward.

V. The Move to a New Country

With this promise of broad religious freedom in hand, the search for a suitable piece of land began in earnest. For that, more delegations were sent. Then, in April 1921, just two months after that letter from the President, when a delegation with representatives from all three settlements was checking out pieces of land in Mexico, there was a very unfortunate split, a parting of ways, between the Manitoba and Swift Current delegates on the one hand, and the Hague-Osler delegates on the other. Reportedly, the Manitoba and Swift Current delegates felt that the Hague-Osler group was somewhat poorer and so, if payment problems were to arise, their people might have to carry a heavier burden. This issue was then exacerbated by a personality clash.

(Sawatzky, p.43)

As a result of this split, the Hague-Osler people, who had been the first to travel to Mexico to look into possibilities there, now had to fend for themselves. The Manitoba and Swift Current groups proceeded to buy two adjacent blocks of land, totaling 225,000 acres, in the Chihuahua area; then, in first days of March 1922, four long chartered and heavily loaded trains left Manitoba for Mexico and two went from Swift Current. (Sawatzky 49) But the Hague-Osler group now looked elsewhere. Two years later they bought a much smaller piece of land in Durango, Mexico, 500 miles south of Chihuahua. Even after some later additions, it reached only 35,000 acres, one-sixth the size of the land purchased in Chihuahua.

During this two year delay for the Hague-Osler group other problems came up. One involved selling their land here. When they first decided to move, all the OC land owners were asked to sign over their land titles to a few church leaders who would then try to sell the land as a block. Signing over one's land titles is not a small thing, but many, including both of my grandfathers, did that. Then the land deal that the church leaders were trying to negotiate with a big American company, fell through. This, plus the delay in getting land in Mexico, led many of the land owners to try to get their titles back. The church leaders allowed this, but the farmers had to pay the legal costs themselves. My father said that when his father got his land titles back, he told the family that they would not move; they would stay in Canada. He will not have been alone.

Another problem during this two year delay was that the burden of the school fines became increasingly heavy. This led Rev. John P. Wall, here from Hochfeld, to write a moving letter to Premier Martin. (Feb 12, 1923). He explained that since the freedoms promised by the federal government in 1873 had been taken away, and since sending their children to the public schools was against their faith, they were now preparing to leave everything they had built up here and move to a new homeland, but that to arrange everything for such a move was costly and took time, and that by now many of their people had become very poor, in part because of the school fines, to the point where they had sold some of their horses and other things, and were unable even to run their farms in the normal way. He then pleaded with the government only to suspend the fines, just long enough so that they could settle their affairs and move away. He said, "... Have mercy with our poor people. God will reward you for it."

Prominent people in society also urged the government to stop imposing the fines; even some senior government officials wanted to back off, but Premier Martin would not. He may have been open to a compromise earlier; now he was not, not even to a temporary suspension of the fines. It was a very difficult time. But once the land in Durango was purchased, people chartered the trains, loaded their stuff and moved, trusting that they would be able to start over.

VI. Developments After the 1920s Migration

Those who moved to Mexico faced serious hardships, but eventually they were able, to a degree, to resume their desired way of life. Their villages were laid out as they were here. Their homes, schools and churches were similar. For food, they relied heavily on their own gardens and their animals, as people did here. Finding suitable crops took time; instead of wheat they learned to grow beans and corn. But to sell these crops was complicated; the marketing systems in Mexico were quite unregulated so sometimes the Mennonites got taken advantage of. Also, there were thieves and bandits. Some Mennonites were killed. For a time, the Mexican government stationed soldiers in the colonies to protect the Mennonites.

Early in the 1930s, they got into cheese making. They learned this from American Mormons who had settled nearby. Cheese making became a life line for many families. After milking their cows in the mornings, they'd set the milk cans by the road and a horse drawn wagon would take them to a cheese factory which might be in the next village. Of course, without electricity and refrigeration, and without trucks to deliver it to markets quickly and in good quantities, it all remained small scale, but Mennonite cheese became widely known in Mexico. Generally, the Mexican towns near the colonies got an economic boost because of the goods the Mennonites needed to buy and the produce they wanted to sell. Still, many Mennonites were poor.

What about changes here after that exodus? One change was that land here became available for others. My father's father bought several quarters from those who left and that, in turn, helped

his children, including my own parents. Without that, my life would have been different. Thus, I am a beneficiary of that exodus. More significantly, some of the Mennonites who were just then fleeing the communist revolution in Russia were able to come here and buy farms. They were called, *Russlaender* Mennonites. Between 50 and 100 such families were able to get farms in the Hague-Osler area that had been built up by those who moved to Mexico. Neuanlage and the surrounding area received about 15 such families; they would form the nucleus of a new church in Neuanlage, known for many years as a General Conference Mennonite church.

The Old Colony church was still here too. In Manitoba and in the Swift Current area, the OC church ceased to exist; in Manitoba it was restarted late in the 1930s, but in the Swift Current area, most of the OC people who did not move to Mexico, joined the *Sommerfelder* church. But here, in the Hague-Osler area, the OC church continued to function, largely because Rev. Johan Loeppky, who had been in that important meeting with the President of Mexico, decided, in the end, not to move; also, a substantial majority of the OC people from this area stayed back. A few years later they elected more ministers. Then they had regular services in more of the villages. One of the new ministers was Rev. Peter Neudorf, grandfather of Rev Darryl Neudorf, now the lead minister at the Grace Mennonite Church in Neuanlage.

After the exodus, the OC church here was different too. It no longer excommunicated people for sending their children to public schools. To have continued with that would have been too impractical. The families had no choice but to send their children to those schools. But many did so with mixed feelings; children would go only as long as the law required. Still, some OC people began to serve on school boards and even on municipal councils. Eventually the church also started Sunday Schools, thus filling a gap in basic Christian education that had once been provided by their village schools. For many decades the Old Colony church here had a substantial number of people.

VII. OC People On Different Paths

If we now look more broadly at people of OC background, meaning many of us here today, we see different paths. One path led to the *Russlaender* churches I mentioned a minute ago. They had programs for young people called *Jugendverein*; OC young people were attracted to them in part because they allowed musical instruments and the livelier *Evangeliums Lieder*.

A slightly different path developed in the 1930s and 40s, through a revival movement stimulated by Rev. I. P. Friesen from Rosthern. I.P. Friesen had been a member of the OC church, but he had started a hardware store in Rosthern, sent his children to the public school there; as a result, he was excommunicated; indeed, he was one of the people whose complaints had led to that inquiry in Warman in 1908. Later, he was elected to the ministry in the Rosthern Mennonite Church, and then, in the 30s and 40s, he'd come to the villages here and hold evangelistic meetings in the

public schools. My father remembered him as a very gifted speaker. Eventually, some of those attracted to his ministry formed the Rudnerweider church, now known as the EMMC; others went in the direction of Pentecostalism and started a church in Gruenthal.

Other paths took OC people from this area to start new settlements in Swan Plain, Sunningdale, Mullingar, Nipawin, Great Dear, even Burns Lake and Vanderhoof in BC. Many of these moves were motivated by economic needs. People were very poor, especially in the 1930s. But interestingly, that religious desire to be more by themselves, away from “the modern world,” so that they could have their own schools and follow their historic way of life, kept reappearing. That religious desire was a factor in the move to the La Crete, Alberta area that started in the 1930s and continued for several decades. It was a key factor also in the 1961 Old Colony move to Prespetou, BC, and also in the 1963 move of some Bergthalers to Bolivia. The latter included people from a Guenther family who were my second cousins from my father’s side. They lived by the South Saskatchewan River close to where the South Venice school used to be.

That religious desire to be more by themselves was also the key factor in the small 1948 exodus to Mexico. This one included a number of my mother’s sisters and brothers as well my grandmother, then a 65 year old widow. This move was initiated *Ältester* Johan Loeppky, the same man who had stayed back in the 1920s. At first he thought most of the OC people from this area would move with him in this new exodus, but in the end only 18 families moved (Sawatzky, 94) and many of these came back soon. Even *Ältester* Loeppky moved back to Canada after only 15 months in Mexico.

My grandmother and a number of my uncles and aunts in that 1948 move stayed in Mexico. So, I have always had cousins there. For many, life was hard. Years later some of my cousins moved from Mexico to Ontario; one of them told me that “often” they had not had enough to eat. In 1976, one of my cousins in Mexico died in childbirth. That is very sad. It should not happen, but if people move to places where modern medical care is not available then things like that are more likely to happen. Another cousin has a different story. Her family started going to a church that was more open to education, even in Spanish. One of her grandsons kept going to school and eventually graduated from a modern medical school in Mexico, became a certified doctor, and opened a small hospital in the Mennonite colony.

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I’ll conclude with a few points about the overall scene. One is that the 5000 plus Old Colony Mennonites who, one hundred years ago, moved to Mexico from here, the Swift Current area, and Manitoba, have become nearly 200,000, spread out in over 200 colonies in eight or nine countries of Latin America. (Some 2400 Bergthaler, Sommerfelder, and Chortitza also moved, most of them to Paraguay.) Certainly, they have problems, but they must also be credited with

being amazingly resourceful; almost everywhere they've made significant contributions to the economy. (Regarding the numbers of those who moved, see Ens, p.214; Friesen SCMR, p.83)

Some OC churches in Latin America do not allow their people to have trucks and cars or rubber tires on their tractors. Others do allow that, as well as electricity and telephones and other modern technology. Some colonies have very rich people alongside others who are poor. In others colonies there are restraints; one of my cousins in Bolivia explained to me that in their colony no one was allowed to have more than 50 hectares of land, precisely because they don't want the gap between the rich and the poor to get too large.

On the matter of teaching the language of the surrounding society in their schools, that is still quite limited, but various new churches have started in the colonies and many of them run schools where Spanish is taught. Of course, many people have picked up a fair amount of Spanish just by living in Latin America. Interestingly, in Ontario, the large OC church, made up of people who moved there from Mexico, has 13 day schools and they all use English as their language of instruction. The Ontario church also has many activities for young people.

Clearly, people of OC background, including many of us, have followed all kinds of paths. We could talk at length about the good and the bad in each path, but on this occasion we just want to acknowledge that one hundred years ago some people from this area took a huge step of faith, at great cost. We may not agree with them, but we want to try to understand how they saw things, and to honour them as fellow pilgrims along the way.

