

## **Immigration and Coaldale Settlement**

**by Helen Toews**

To review our Mennonite story, we need to go back across the Atlantic to the Ukraine, where many of us have our roots. You remember your family's struggle! The couple whose personal courage, sacrifice, and persistence enabled over 20,000 Mennonites from Russia to enter Canada was Benjamin B. and Maria (Rogalsky) Janz. The personal courage and sacrifice applied to Maria as well. She was home alone raising six children.

Personal courage for Benjamin Janz was central in facing government officials in many departments. Janz believed that under the stern exterior of every official was a human being. If he could connect with that humanity, good things could happen.

Foreign mail was censored. How could he let the Mennonite community abroad know what was happening in chaotic Russia? He spent time with the German Consul in Kharkov. Finally, the consul agreed to let him use German diplomatic mail. This permitted letters to be sent to Holland, Germany, USA and Canada asking for a place for immigrants to go.

Janz also made contact with the head of the secret police, a man named Manzev, in Kharkov. Manzev liked Janz. Prior to Manzev's departure to Moscow, Janz went to wish him well. Manzev's parting words were, "If you are ever in trouble, come and see me." In 1924 a group of 1,200 immigrants was refused exodus by the secret police. The future of the entire immigration was at stake, so Janz contacted Manzev. The immigrants were given permission to leave.

Janz made many sacrifices. There were dark hours of struggle, discouragement, and loneliness. He couldn't share top secrets, except on his knees with God. He also made sacrifices in family life. His three-year-old daughter once asked her mother, "Mama, who is this man that comes in once in a while and the other children call him Papa?" That hurt-- that's sacrifice.

Janz was persistent. When the CPR officials came to Moscow, Janz requested travel credit. He pleaded with them to take a chance on people who had nothing and would have nothing for years to come. The CPR extended travel credit and promised to look after the immigrants once they had crossed the Soviet border. Finally, in June of 1923 the first group left Lichtenau under the CPR program. Their travel debt was repaid 23 years later at six per cent interest.

## **What challenges did these new immigrants face in Canada?**

1. Travel debt;
2. Land debt--they were farmers;
3. Farm implement debt;
4. Living expenses;
5. The Depression of the 1930s.

## **How did they cope?**

The Mennonites who settled in Coaldale came from six regions in Russia. Each group had its own regional idea of what was best. Initially they simply wanted to be who they were, continue as before, but they learned to face reality by working together for change.

## **What brought them through the Depression of the 1930s?**

Some felt it was the sugar beets that were central to the community's survival. They learned to work together. There was one drawback: "We have no time to live, we only work."

## **How was the community sustained?**

1. Schools:
  - a) The Coaldale Bible School operated from 1931 to 1965 (36 years). It was a five-month course. This enabled the young people to help with farm work.
  - b) The German School kept up the German language and traditions. It was held Saturday mornings.
  - c) The Alberta Mennonite High School operated for 18 years, from 1946 to 1964. The schools ensured Biblical knowledge, provided an effective group to help in the church, and sustained the Mennonite identity for a long time. In other words, they served a counter-cultural role while helping young Mennonites to gradually enter mainstream Canadian life.

The benefits of the AMHS were numerous. It graduated 287 students, most of whom became professors, teachers, nurses, doctors, engineers, missionaries, authors, and farmers. The systematic Bible teaching resulted in changed lives and a commitment to Christ. The social benefits included an appreciation of music. The school choir performed Handel's Messiah with a forty-piece orchestra. The school also had an effective drama program. The high school and Bible school faltered due to a one-church base.

Geographic distances separated the Mennonite communities, and eventually

financial resources proved inadequate. There were no government subsidies, but costs kept rising. And some people were opposed to the schools.

## 2. Business.

Were there any society and business ventures? In a new community business ventures were essential--grocery stores, hardware stores, and blacksmith shops. I counted nineteen businesses. A number of societies were also formed.

### a. The Hospital Society, 1934.

The Mennonites were shocked at the medical costs in Lethbridge. In Ohrloff they had paid Dr. Dick ten rubles for an appendectomy. Here they paid \$150 for the operation and \$190 for the hospital stay. When three people proposed opening a hospital in the empty Bank of Commerce building, the community pitched in to help organize a temporary facility. Dr. David Epp from Saskatchewan was hired in November of 1933, and in February of 1934 the hospital went into operation. During the following year a used hotel in Lethbridge was moved into Coaldale and renovated with volunteer help. It opened in February of 1935 and operated for twenty years. The budget was limited, so if people had extra products on the farm, like eggs or vegetables, they were donated.

Once a year they had a "Gaben Abend" [Gift Evening]. The hospital staff made a list of needs and the community responded, piling their gifts on the tables provided. The hospital staff also cared for a vegetable garden.

The third hospital was built in 1954 and the fourth in 1989. Dr. Epp helped stabilize the medical work in Coaldale for the first fourteen years. How different the hospital story would have been if he had not guided the venture during those pioneer years. This socialized health-care system inaugurated by the Coaldale Mennonites was the first of its kind in Alberta.

### b. In 1938 the Coaldale Co-operative Cheese Factory opened its doors. Franz Hubert was on the board. After the first two years of operation 93.3 % of the cheese production was graded number one. Because of an abundant supply of hay, grain, and even beet pulp, the district milk production expanded.

In 1969 the cheese factory produced a 23-pound cheese, wrapped it up and marked it "Out of this world." It was then presented from the town of Coaldale to the three Apollo astronauts who had just returned from walking on the moon. An attached poem was summarized as follows:

We saw you dancing around on the moon  
looking for green cheese.  
Sorry you didn't find any.  
Please accept our gift of yellow Coaldale cheese—  
it's homemade and delicious.

When other businesses such as an egg grading station, a locker plant (freezer units), a library, and a cannery were added to the cheese factory site, new buildings were added, and in 1945 a new cheese factory with modern equipment was also completed. For the cannery, animals were donated and the canned meat was sent to the MCC for overseas use. A funeral aid society and a credit union were also established. (Franz Hubert was a member of the credit union board.) In 1972 the cheese factory was sold to the Alpha Milk Company in Red Deer, at least partially due to new health regulations for both the factory and the farmers.

c. Coaldale Cemetery.

Death was not forgotten. Already in 1927 a child had drowned in an irrigation ditch, and several adults had also died. Initially, all were buried on farms. As a result, in December 1927 a committee was elected to investigate the possibility for a cemetery near the church. Five months later a five-acre plot was purchased from the CPR for \$5 an acre.

There are more stories, but I will conclude with a statement from historian John B. Toews:

As was the case with other immigrant groups that made up Coaldale, the Mennonites brought with them:

1. Farming and business skills;
2. Instrumental and vocal music;
3. Long-standing democratic traditions;
4. A desire to become part of a new country that welcomed them.

Like all the immigrants, the Mennonites gradually integrated into the larger community and helped make Coaldale the vibrant and vital community it is today.