

# The D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc.

Hans Werner, University of Winnipeg

The D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc. was established by Delbert Plett, a Steinbach, Manitoba lawyer and businessman. Delbert Plett had a passion for history and particularly for the history of the conservative Mennonites from the Dutch-North German-Russian tradition. He was a prolific researcher and writer of history himself, having published a several books, including a seven volume series on the *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites who settled in the area around Steinbach. He was a controversial and passionate defender of the legitimacy of the conservative Mennonite belief system, Mennonites' attachment to the High German language for church and the Low German language for the everyday, and their reticence in embracing the technology that pervades the modern world.

Plett died in 2004 and the Foundation became the residual beneficiary of his estate, which with continuing growth in the Steinbach area real estate market has grown considerably from the original estimated value. The Foundation is governed by a Board of Directors that meets twice a year to consider its program and mandate. In 2007 the Foundation Board hired Hans Werner as half time Executive Director and the Foundation's offices were established in Bryce Hall on the University of Winnipeg campus where it became part of the new Centre for Canadian History.

The Foundation's mandate is to promote research, scholarship, publication, and dissemination of the history of the Mennonite people who came to Canada from Russia in the 1870s and established agricultural communities in southern Manitoba. They subsequently also migrated to the Saskatoon and Swift Current areas of the Northwest, now Saskatchewan, at the turn of the century. In the 1920s most of the conservative Old Colony Mennonites migrated further to establish colonies in the state of Chihuahua in Mexico. Continuing migrations and high birth rates have combined to plant Mennonites all over Mexico, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, and Belize.

To fulfill its mandate, the Foundation has a Graduate Students Fellowship program that supports students in the Joint Masters Program in History at the University of Winnipeg, at Canadian Mennonite University, and at the University of Manitoba in the case of doctoral students. The Foundation also has a grant program that provides funding for worthy projects that advance the study of the Dutch-North German-Russian Mennonite story. The Foundation maintains close ties with the Chair in Mennonite Studies located at the University of Winnipeg and benefits from the proximity of major Mennonite archives such as the Mennonite Heritage Centre. Recent research supported by the Foundation included a project to preserve the Mennonite orphan's organization (the *Waisanamt*) records that were begun in Manitoba and taken to Mexico by creating a digital copy of the records and depositing them with the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. Other projects have included supporting researchers interviewing Mennonites in the colonies of Bolivia, book publishing grants, and a study of the impact of the Spanish Flu of 1918 on the Mennonite villages of Manitoba.

For more information about the work of the Foundation please visit its website at: [www.plettfoundation.org](http://www.plettfoundation.org)

The Chair in German-Canadian Studies was established in 1989 with grants from the Secretary of State's Program for Canadian Ethnic Studies and a group of private philanthropists within the German-Canadian community of Winnipeg. It is located in, and affiliated with, the History Department at the University of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The Chair promotes the teaching of, and research into the history and culture of German-speaking immigrants and their descendants in Canada. It interacts with the German-Canadian community in Winnipeg, Manitoba and the rest of Canada through public lectures and the newsletter. The Chair promotes regional, national and international research through conferences, publications and grants.

Editor/Producer: Alexander Freund

Chair in German-Canadian Studies

The University of Winnipeg

515 Portage Avenue

Winnipeg, MB, Canada R3B 2E9

Phone: 204-786-9009

Fax: 204-774-4134

Email: [gcs@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:gcs@uwinnipeg.ca)

Unless otherwise stated, all articles were written by Alexander Freund

Submissions of articles, news, reports, and reviews as well as artwork and photos for publication in this newsletter are welcome.



## German-Canadian Studies <http://germancanadian.uwinnipeg.ca>

### German-Canadian Memories of Nazi Past

**Crystal Leochko recently completed her thesis entitled "Acknowledgement or Avoidance? German-Canadian Immigrant Women's Memories of National Socialism" to graduate with a Master of Arts degree from the Joint Program in History between the University of Manitoba and University of Winnipeg. She completed her B.A. in History and English in 2002 at the University of Manitoba, and her Pre-Masters degree in History in 2003 at the University of Manitoba. She is currently employed by the Manitoba Civil Service. She lives, together with her fiancé, just outside of Winnipeg. Below is her description of her thesis.**



I grew up in Arborg, Manitoba. While attending high school and completing a family history project I became interested in the lives of immigrants in Canada. My ancestors immigrated to Canada in the early 1900s from the Ukraine, and Ukrainian culture has always been part of my life, be it in the form of Ukrainian dancing and polkas, or cabbage rolls and perogies.

While completing my undergraduate degree I became interested in Nazi Germany, and especially in the role that women and girls played. I wanted to focus my thesis on these women. With the assistance of my advisor, Dr. Alexander Freund, I chose to focus on German women after they had immigrated to Canada in order to determine how living in Canada had affected how they dealt with the past.

My thesis examines the oral histories of ten women who experienced National Socialism in Germany during the Second World War and immigrated to Canada between 1947 and 1960. The women in this study were born between 1924 and 1941. The main question of this thesis is whether living in Canadian society affected how they dealt with their German pasts. I examine: The League of German Girls (BDM); anti-Semitism in Germany, encounters with Jews in Canada and multiculturalism; and the women's memories of the Second World War.

Although the search for narrators was difficult at times, the majority of the women who took part in the study appeared to be excited by the project. Some interviews took place over the phone, as some of the narrators lived in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. I was able to visit the remainder of the women interviewed in Manitoba. Although the women appeared to accept me into their homes, many of the women became slightly guarded as soon as I turned on my tape recorder.

I determined that living in Canada provided the women with a way to avoid dealing with the past following immigration. Although the women were able to discuss the topics in this study with me during their interviews, and many have discussed their experiences in Germany with family and friends, in many of these situations the women presented themselves as victims.

continued on page 2



## Germans from Russia Heritage Collection

“My lifelong dream,” says Michael Miller, “has been to keep alive and enhance the heritage of the Germans from Russia.” Miller is the director of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection (GRHC), which was established in 1978 at the NDSU Libraries.



Photo: GRHC staff (l. to r.): Michael M. Miller, Acacia (Jonas) Stuckle, Jessica Clark, Jay Gage.

The GRHC archives have become one of the most comprehensive collections of German-Russian resources globally. Resources include books, family histories, photographs, maps, and oral histories relating to the Germans from Russia in western Canadian prairie provinces, especially Alberta and Saskatchewan. The GRHC has particularly strong collections relating to prairie life, the Mennonites, and the Hutterites.

The GRHC’s mission is to collect, document, preserve, exhibit, translate, publish, promote, and make accessible resources on the culture, history, folklore, textiles and clothing, and foodways of the Germans from Russia. The focus is on Bessarabian, Black Sea, Crimean, Dobrudscha, and Volhynian Germans and their descendents in North Dakota and the Northern Plains, including the Canadian prairie provinces.

The GRHC has expanded its activities and projects to include audio oral history interviews; clothing and textiles; the Dakota Memories Oral History Project; electronic discussion groups; heritage tours to Ukraine and Germany; online resources; outreach programs; photo archives; publications; and translations.

Since the summer of 1996, the GRHC has sponsored fifteen “Journey to the Homeland”-Tours to Odessa, Ukraine and Stuttgart, Germany for persons wishing to visit their former homeland Bessarabian, Black Sea and Crimean German villages.

In cooperation with Prairie Public Television, the GRHC has helped to produce five award-winning documentaries: 1) The Germans from Russia: Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie; 2) Schmeckfest: Food Traditions of the Germans from Russia; 3) Prairie Crosses, Prairie Roses: Iron

Crosses of the Great Plains; 4) A Soulful Sound: Music of the Germans from Russia; 5) Heaven Is Our Homeland. In production for 2010 is a documentary relating to the assimilation of Germans from Russia in American society.

The GRHC launched the Dakota Memories Oral History Project (DMOHP) in 2005. The DMOHP organizers designed this project to document the cultural heritage and preserved the childhood memories of second- and third-generation

Germans from Russia on the Northern Plains. From 2005 to 2009, interviews have been completed with more than 200 narrators. In 2006 with a grant from the Embassy of Canada, 28 narrators were interviewed at Regina, Saskatoon, Unity, Tramping Lake, Allan, and Kronau, Saskatchewan. In August, 2009, Dr. Alexander Freund, Chair of the German Canadian Studies Program, University of Winnipeg, visited Fargo to discuss a cooperative oral history project with the GRHC.

The GRHC staff includes: Michael M. Miller, director and bibliographer, at NDSU since 1967 (michael.miller@ndsu.edu); Acacia (Jonas) Stuckle, special collections associate (acacia.stuckle@ndsu.edu); and Jay Gage, curator. Contact information is: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050 USA (Tel: 701-231-8416 or 701-231-6596; Website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

### German-Canadian Memories of Nazi Past

They also concentrated on the more positive aspects of the Nazi regime, including the camaraderie in the BDM, and made it a point to emphasize that they did not know about the Holocaust while they were girls. Despite these findings, by participating in the study and by discussing their memories and experiences, and in some cases their changing views of the past, the women demonstrated that they are making progress in the process of dealing with their pasts as Germans. I am grateful to the women who chose to take part in this study. Without their participation it could not have been completed, and I am pleased to be able to share some of their life stories.

## Immigrants’ High German Influenced by Russian and English

Nikolai Penner is a doctoral student at the University of Waterloo. He received a German-Canadian Studies Research Grant in 2008 for his research on the use of High German among different groups of Russian Mennonites in Canada. Below is his report on his completed project.



The main goals of this project were to investigate the High German variety spoken by the second- and the third-wave Russian Mennonite immigrants in Canada, to examine the patterns of language use by each group in Russia and how they have changed in Canada, and to determine in how far this High German variety corresponds to the Standard High German.

The results of the study indicate that generally, the patterns of language use by both groups in Russia were very similar but nevertheless showed two important differences. First of all, members of the second wave tried to show their patriotic feelings toward their fatherland in several ways, one of which included instruction in the Russian language in the Mennonite schools. At the same time, although the attitude of the third-wave immigrants to the Russian language was largely positive, they usually learned Russian out of necessity and exhibited no patriotic feelings. Secondly, High German was found to be perceived by the Mennonites as a much more prestigious language than Plautdietsch, and was clearly on the rise as the communal language in the twentieth century. This violated to some extent the stable bilingualism with diglossia, which had existed in the Russian Mennonite colonies since their establishment in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The usage of High German for informal communication was found to have further

increased in Canada among both groups as a part of a conscious attempt of the Mennonite church to save High German as the language of religion. However, despite of this, High German has been almost completely lost by each of the groups within a three generation period.

Further, it has been determined that the variety of High German spoken by the Russian Mennonites significantly departs from Standard High German in a number of respects. While some of the non-standard constructions can be traced

back to the influence of the English language, and therefore, entered the Mennonite High German after their immigration to Canada, the other non-standard constructions were most likely present in their speech already in Russia. It has been argued that these constructions were also relatively stable in the group’s High German, and possibly were even considered a part of their Russian Mennonite identity.

Finally, it has been shown that Russian Mennonite High German has been subject to both language-internal as well as language-external processes of language change, and that it is not always possible to determine where the first end and the second begin. Thus, a significant deviation in case assignment as well as a certain reduction in the explicit case/number/gender markedness found in the speech of most participants, are the results of both convergence with Plautdietsch as well as of the independent development towards a two-case system typical to all Germanic languages. In fact, the combination of both may explain why these developments have been present in Russian Mennonite High German before Standard High German was removed as the roof language, which usually is the major trigger for such changes.

## Fellowship Program 2010

Please visit <http://www.germancanadian.ca> to find out about scholarships, grants, and essay prizes offered through 2010 German-Canadian Studies Fellowship Program.

