

The "Green Hell" Becomes Home: Mennonites in Paraguay as Described in the Writings of Peter P. Klassen

A Review Essay

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Kaputi Mennonita, eine friedliche Begegnung im Chacokrieg. Collected and edited by Peter P. Klassen. Filadelfia, Paraguay: n.p. 1975. Pp. 166.

Immer kreisen die Geier: Ein Buch vom Chaco Boreal in Paraguay. By Peter P. Klassen. Filadelfia: n.p. 1986. Pp. 263.

Die Mennoniten in Paraguay: Reich Gottes und Reich dieser Welt, vol. 1, 2nd edition. By Peter P. Klassen. Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V. 2001. Pp. 480. (1st edition, 1988. Pp. 383.)

Kampbrand und andere mennonitische Geschichten aus dem paraguayischen Chaco. By Peter P. Klassen. Filadelfia: n.a. 1989. Pp. 137.

Die deutsch-völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco, Paraguay, 1943-1945: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der auslandsdeutschen Mennoniten während des Dritten Reiches. By Peter P. Klassen. Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V. 1990. Pp. 148.

Die Mennoniten in Paraguay: Begegnung mit Indianern und Paraguayern, vol. 2. By Peter P. Klassen. Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V. 1991. Pp. 376.

Und ob ich schon wanderte. . . : Geschichten zur Geschichte der Wanderung und Flucht der Mennoniten von Preußen über Rußland nach Amerika. By Peter P. Klassen. Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V. 1997. Pp. 319.

Die schwarzen Reiter: Geschichten zur Geschichte eines Glaubensprinzips. By Peter P. Klassen. Uchte, Germany: Sonnentau Verlag. 1999. Pp. 273.

The story of the Mennonites in Paraguay is multifaceted and full of surprises. It is a story of successes and failures, never lacking in dramatic elements; and it embraces a wide gamut of Mennonites: from arch traditionalists like the Old Colony people from Mexico, who avoid any education save the most rudimentary, to congregations with members in the professions, even in politics, educated in national as well as European

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and American colleges and universities. While Paraguay is not the only country where Mennonite settlers have essentially replaced an existing local population, in no other country have they been forced so directly to acknowledge a local population living there before they arrived and to grapple head-on with issues related to recognizing another culture.

Paraguay has a Mennonite population of over 29,000¹ today. They live in 17 different colonies throughout the country and in the capital city of Asunción. Somewhat over half of them live in 3 colonies in the Chaco Boreal, about 1300 in Asunción, and the remaining in colonies located in East Paraguay. The settlers arrived between 1927 and 1983, coming to this country for different reasons.

Although several books and studies on these Mennonites have appeared in English,² materials written in German, some by Paraguayan Mennonites themselves, are not well known in the U.S. While Mennonites in the U.S. may be unaware of their Paraguayan co-religionists, many Canadian Russian Mennonites are well acquainted with much of the Paraguayan Mennonite story because of their common German and Low German (Plautdietsch) languages and the considerable migration back and forth.

Published in German, the earliest significant account of the immigration to Paraguay, albeit written from the viewpoint of a 1930s German Nationalist, is Walter Quiring's *Deutsche erschließen den Chaco*.³ Quiring visited Paraguay but was not an immigrant to Paraguay himself. The most significant single author dealing with the Paraguayan Mennonite experience, in his eight published books totaling over 2000 pages, is Peter P. Klassen. Unlike Quiring, he has lived and worked in Paraguay since he arrived there as a young boy. His books, available only in German (except *Kaputi Mennonita*, which is translated into Spanish), deal with many different aspects of Mennonite life, the background of the settlers, their practices, their environment and their interaction with their surrounding world. This essay will introduce Klassen and provide an insight into the scope of his work and the story he has to tell.

1. *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, no. 1 (2000).

2. Notably Calvin Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), dealing with the encounter between the indigenous people and the Mennonites, and Edgar Stoesz and Muriel Stackley, *Garden in the Wilderness* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1999), a general overview. Note also earlier works: J. Winfield Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1953) and Willard Smith and Verna Smith, *Paraguayan Interlude* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950), a personal anecdotal account.

3. Walter Quiring, *Deutsche erschließen den Chaco* (Karlsruhe: Verlagsdruckerei Heinrich Schneider, 1936).

Klassen was born in Chortitza, today in the Ukraine, in 1926. With his parents he fled to Germany via Moscow in 1929, continuing on to Paraguay in 1931, where he settled in Fernheim colony, which his parents helped establish. There he received his education, completing teacher training, and later he finished his studies at universities in Switzerland and Germany. When he returned to the Chaco from Europe, the colony administration "expected him together with other young people like him (mit andern 'jungen Kräften') to raise the intellectual, spiritual and cultural level of our society."⁴ He began a career as an educator that also involved teacher training and administration. For many years he served as editor of *Mennoblatt*, published in Filadelfia in the Chaco. Later he turned to writing, including three books of history. The first one is a general history of the Mennonites in Paraguay, first published in 1988; then a volume documenting the National Socialist experience in Fernheim from 1933 to 1945; and a third volume (volume 2 of his history of the Mennonites in Paraguay) on the encounter between the Mennonites and indigenes and other Paraguayans.

These are accompanied by five volumes of short stories dealing with the life and faith experiences as well as the background of the Paraguayan settlers, the people whom Klassen knows, identifies with and loves. He refers to some of these as *Geschichten zur Geschichte* (i.e., stories to accompany or illustrate history). While he writes the history and tells the stories of all of the Mennonites in Paraguay in his two main volumes, he is, of course, best acquainted with those who arrived from Russia by way of Germany in 1930 and established Fernheim; this group, understandably, receives major attention.⁵

MENNONITES IN PARAGUAY—KINGDOM OF GOD AND KINGDOM OF THIS WORLD

Klassen begins his first volume of history with a brief overview of immigration to Paraguay and the Chaco prior to the coming of the Mennonites. Because of the inhospitable environment for agriculture—it was, with good reason, sometimes called the "green hell"—most of these earlier settlements were of short duration. He portrays the first migration of conservative Russian Mennonites coming from Manitoba and Saskatchewan as people with the profound conviction that their relocation to the Chaco was God's will, which gave them the strength to endure great suffering. In Canada they felt their faith and way of life threatened when the government would no longer guarantee their own

4. "Das Interview mit Peter P. Klassen," *Mennoblatt* (Filadelfia), no. 1 (Jan. 16, 2001), 3-4. All translations of German citations in this essay are by the writer.

5. Not all the stories in his collections of short stories relate to Mennonites in Paraguay.

German language schools for their children. To them Paraguay offered the possibility of preserving what they considered essential for religious survival, whence the uncompromising commitment to persevere. After several delegations from Canada to Paraguay, the earliest in 1921, a total of 277 families arrived in 1927 in seven groups at Puerto Casado, the gateway to the Chaco, their future home. Still 200 kilometers from their destination, they remained stranded there for several months, waiting in a makeshift settlement until their land was surveyed, which would permit them to proceed on the final, most difficult, leg of their journey. During the time at Puerto Casado a typhoid epidemic took the lives of 168 of the 1744 of those who had arrived.

Klassen's well-told story, "Greta und Jasch,"⁶ provides insight into the situation in the barrack settlement in Puerto Casado. Jasch joined one of the immigrant groups to be reunited with his fiancée, already in Puerto Casado. Greta came from a traditional family that did not question the bishop's decisions and pronouncements, as compared to Jasch, who had already acquired more education and whose family was not inclined to leave Manitoba. To accommodate the parents of Greta, they planned to marry according to the wishes of her parents and then return to Canada together. Jasch arrived in the middle of the typhoid epidemic and quickly realized that it was caused by the deplorable sanitary conditions in the camp. Whereas Jasch knew about germ theory, the bishop steadfastly maintained that God was testing his flock and that it was useless if not sinful to try to do anything about it. "In the barrack settlement at Casado Jasch became a challenge and a threat to their faith and, as Bishop Wiebe admitted in a more intimate circle, a temptation of the evil one. Is it possible that true faith and pure teachings should be shaken, even after they had left their home because of their faith and accepted the hardships of the migration and the misery of this endless waiting period at the harbor?"⁷

The background of Fernheim, the second Chaco colony, is very different from that of Menno, the first. Some 10,000 Mennonites who were trying to escape Stalinism and starvation in Russia descended on Moscow in 1929, hoping to be able to exit from there. Despite terrible experiences in Moscow, with many being forced to return or sent to Siberia, a remnant succeeded in leaving for Germany with the help of the German government as a result of the intervention and efforts of Benjamin Unruh, a Russian-born Mennonite living in Germany. Representatives at the Mennonite World Relief Congress in Danzig in 1930, among them Harold S. Bender, had become aware of the plight of

6. Peter P. Klassen, *Immer kreisen die Geier* (Filadelfia: n.p., 1983), 201-19.

7. *Ibid.*, 211.

these Mennonites and saw in Paraguay a solution for their resettlement. Bender himself expressed considerable enthusiasm when he said: "We had a future Mennonite state in mind where, if possible, the Russian Mennonites in their totality could reestablish themselves and continue to develop their life and their culture in unlimited freedom. The Mennonites (das Mennoniten-Völklein) can continue to exist in Paraguay with their culture and faith, beyond reach of danger and under conceivably favorable circumstances."⁸ In 1930 Mennonite representatives of this conference orchestrated the relocation of the Russian Mennonites from Germany to Paraguay. Klassen carefully recounts and documents the events leading up to and surrounding their arrival, the first group consisting of 61 families who arrived in March 1930.

Arriving in the Chaco with limited on-site advance preparations on their behalf, they immediately confronted difficulties on many sides. A typhoid epidemic and no doctor to attend the sick resulted in numerous deaths. Finding drinking water proved a daunting task; digging deep wells in soil that easily caved in resulted in workers being buried alive. One settler wrote: "We were compelled to dig again and again, until we had dug thirteen wells before we found potable water (Süßwasser) . . . we gave thanks to God and drank *Süßwasser*."⁹

Some, however, could not give thanks to God in these dire conditions. The circumstances under which this group had come together were vastly different from those of the settlers arriving from Canada earlier. Included were individuals with little commitment who had simply wanted to escape the situation in Russia and had now ended up in Paraguay because there was no other place on earth for them to go. Klassen cites the following excerpt from a letter from Paraguay that appeared in a Soviet German language newspaper:

We've been sold to South America like sheep . . . The preachers always told us we had left for religious reasons. But let me tell you what the situation really is. The capitalists in Germany paid off all the preachers compelling them to travel throughout Germany saying nasty things about our Russia. There's a Mennonite organization here in which everybody cheats as best they can There was a big gathering here these days. Everybody wants to leave, for

8. Peter P. Klassen, *Und ob ich schon wanderte . . . : Geschichten zur Geschichte der Wanderung und Flucht der Mennoniten von Preußen über Rußland nach Amerika* (Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V., 1997), 198. Original citation in Christian Neff, ed., *Bericht über die Mennonitische Welt-Hilfs-Konferenz vom 31. August bis 3. September 1930 in Danzig* (Karlsruhe: Verlagsdruckerei Heinrich Schneider, 1930) 121-22.

9. Peter P. Klassen, *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay, Reich Gottes und Reich dieser Welt*, 2nd rev. ed., vol. 1 (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V., 2001), 111.

we're all dying here. The heat is unbearable . . . ; if you still have enough potatoes for a meal, thank God for it, . . . here there aren't any.¹⁰

The colonies went through a long series of difficulties, reminiscent of the Children of Israel wandering through the Wilderness, but here there was little hope of a Promised Land on this earth: continued drought, grasshopper plagues, the Bolivian-Paraguayan Chaco War which brought fighting right to their doorsteps, and discontent in their own ranks, with settlers wanting to escape and threatening to leave their land debts unpaid. The latter caused sufficient concern in Fernheim Colony so that for a while the colony administration blockaded Puerto Casado, the only exit from the Chaco at that time. By 1937, nevertheless, a new colony, Friesland, was established in East Paraguay by former Fernheim settlers, a move that caused much soul-searching and deep rifts in relationships at the time.

By telling how the colony administration tried to exert control over the would-be deserters, Klassen gives the reader one of many examples of the contradiction and the problematic inherent in a Mennonite community that is both a civic community and a community of believers, as stated in the subtitle of the volume: *Kingdom of God and Kingdom of This World (Reich Gottes und Reich dieser Welt)*, a recurring theme in his work. The Anabaptist ideal calls for abstinence from the concerns of civil society, says the author, and yet the Mennonite colony embraces both of these concerns. Already in Russia the Mennonites ignored this ideal, and Klassen goes on to state that even Harold Bender, perhaps in his enthusiasm for Paraguay as a home for Russian Mennonites, agreed to subordinate this ideal to the demands of the actual situation at hand.¹¹ Klassen carefully explains the background and the present effect of this tradition in the colonies.

To a limited extent the Mennonites had already known self-administration in civic matters in Prussia. Then, in Russia, the government had no interest in the assimilation of the Mennonites into mainstream culture and later on even superimposed self-government on them, as they did on other ethnic groups. "The government drew a fence around them, creating, as it were, a state within a state . . ."¹² This "fence" became an appreciated tradition and, when brought along to Paraguay,

10. Ibid., 113, 114.

11. Klassen, *Und ob ich schon wanderte . . .*, 198.

12. Quoted by Klassen from D[ietrich] H[einrich] Epp, *Die Chortitzer Mennoniten, Versuch einer Darstellung des Entwicklungsganges derselben* (Odessa, Russia: the author, 1889; rpt., Steinbach, Manitoba: Die Mennonitische Post and Delbert F. Plett, 1984), 73.

continued largely unchallenged, although the Paraguayan government does not advocate self-administration nor its accompanying isolationism.

Some of Klassen's stories focus on the conflicts arising from this duality. "Buschinsel"¹³ tells the story of one Abram Wiebe, son of a bishop, who himself seemed destined to become a bishop in Menno Colony. Instead, however, he became *Oberschulze* (chief administrator) of the colony. Cattle rustling and a break-in at the colony store, where the thieves made off with a couple of guns and an ample supply of ammunition and other items, resulted in complaints from the settlers, compelling Wiebe to take serious action. He informed the Paraguayan military commander of that region, hoping to distance himself from the situation. Lacking a vehicle, however, the commander asked Wiebe to drive, as they looked for the criminals. Upon locating them, the commander and the soldiers he brought along shot at them, killing three of them and wounding the fourth one. These were poor young men who had come to the Chaco looking for work, and in the process resorted to thievery. The three corpses and the wounded teenager were loaded onto the back of Wiebe's vehicle. The reader experiences the intense psychological and spiritual conflict this father of eight children suffers as he tried to be faithful to his religious heritage while exerting civil authority.¹⁴

Let us now return to an overview of this first volume of Klassen's history. Following more than 50 pages of general information on Paraguay and the Mennonites, he documents the establishment of the various Mennonite colonies in Paraguay between 1927 and 1983. After the wave of refugees coming from Russia via Germany in the wake of World War II, no new Mennonite settlers came until a new migration from 1966 to 1983 brought more than 5000 from Mexico, some 120 from Canada and 569 from the U.S., the latter listed as Amish and Old Mennonites. Those coming from Mexico, Old Colony Mennonites, avoided exposure to the established colonies for fear of losing their peculiarities and their way of life.

13. Peter P. Klassen, "Buschinsel," *Kampbrand* (Filadelfia: n.p., 1989), 11-30.

14. An equally compelling situation resulted following the murder of four members of the Stahl family in the northern part of Fernheim Colony by Ayoreo Indians. The *Oberschulze* felt compelled to request guns and ammunition from the Paraguayan army to protect the villagers in the area of the massacre from further attacks. From Klassen's account it seems clear that the intent, at least for many who stood guard at night, was to shoot to kill if necessary. There was much soul-searching on the part of many, but fortunately there were no further attacks. When the danger was over, the guns were returned and "the conflict between non-resistance and self-defense was forgotten."—Peter P. Klassen, "Die Chamacocos," *Die schwarzen Reiter: Geschichten zur Geschichte eines Glaubensprinzips* (Uchte, Germany: Sonnentau Verlag, 1999), 263.

The years from 1950 to 1970 were years of crisis, due to at least two factors: first, the impossibility of economic progress with repeated crop failures and lack of access to a market and, second, an exodus to Canada, especially from the ranks of those who had come from Russia. By the early 70s the economic situation had stabilized, thanks in part to the organization of cooperatives and continuing cooperation among the colonies.

The chapter "The Mennonite Empire" ("Das mennonitische Reich") explains the organization and functions of the civic system of the colonies: order and jurisdiction and communal work responsibilities (Scharwerk) in such matters as road building and maintenance. The subsection, "*Das mennonitische Volk*," begins with the following observation: "As paradoxical as it seems to refer to a faith community that historically considers itself a free church as a race or as an ethnic group (Volk), this concept is accepted as self-evident by the Russian Mennonites and has been used again and again as a matter of course, innocently and usually affectionately, as an expression of familial belonging together."¹⁵ This concept continues in Paraguay: The Mennonites see themselves as an ethnic group and outsiders see them as such, too. This leads into the cultural and linguistic heritage most of the Paraguayan Mennonites have in common.

Differences in lifestyle and education between the *Russländer* (Fernheim and Friesland) and Menno Colony were poles apart upon their arrival in the Chaco. The *Russländer* demonstrated an attitude of progress and openness to the world, whereas those of Menno Colony were consciously conservative and withdrawn, characterized, according to Klassen, by "calm and composure and an almost fatalistic acceptance of the situation, whereas in Fernheim there was fermentation and seething from the very first year of the settlement."¹⁶ This difference in attitude had a profound influence on such institutions as church and school and on lifestyle. By the late 80s many of these differences, however, had virtually disappeared; for instance, secondary schools had become generally acceptable in the Menno Colony.¹⁷

Klassen also reports on church practices and discipline. Baptism is a compelling societal norm in the colonies, and there are regularly organized evangelistic meetings intended to lead young people to a conversion experience, the essential prerequisite for baptism.¹⁸ Such cooperation in other areas of church life among those who came in 1947

15. Klassen, *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay*, 2nd rev. ed., vol. 1, 285.

16. *Ibid.*, 313-14.

17. *Ibid.*, see table for different colonies, 334.

18. *Ibid.*, 419.

and earlier, including those who came from Canada, is a fact. Church practices tended to move more in the direction of the Mennonite Brethren (MB). That is, they became more evangelical, compelling the other groups to discipline their members more strictly, too. Smoking and consumption of alcohol, which had been fairly common earlier in non-MB groups, was now regarded as somewhat inexpedient, and for their joint mission work among the indigenous people it was considered inappropriate. Violation of sexually acceptable behavior was reason for discipline. As late as 1985 the Commission for Congregational Concerns (Kommission für Kirchenangelegenheiten), which included the churches of Fernheim, ruled that young women who had consummated sexual relations prior to marriage should symbolize this at their wedding by not wearing a headdress and veil,¹⁹ reflecting the long, severe history of disciplining sexual offenses among the Prussian/Russian Mennonites.²⁰

The colonies developed their own network of social services, including hospitals, which the Mennonites continue from their tradition in Russia and Canada. Klassen points out that, contrary to the situation in Russia, where outsiders, even Russian household help and other employees of the Mennonites, were often excluded from the same healthcare the Mennonites enjoyed, in Paraguay Mennonites learned the importance of permitting their organized social services to spill out beyond their own. Hence, all indigenous employees have the same access to the hospitals as do the Mennonites. In fact, Klassen suggests that in Fernheim the settlers saw the opportunity to minister to their neighbors that they had missed in Russia. Perhaps having a mission responsibility at their very doorstep helped to give meaning to an otherwise seemingly hopeless situation in the Chaco in the early years. One of the first missionaries to the Indians explains the motivation of the Mennonites as follows: "When we were confronted by the Indian we immediately felt the responsibility to bring him the gospel. He so clearly appeared to our innermost being as the fallen one, as one abandoned of God, as the Prodigal Son, as one destined to die. It was God's will that we should be transferred to this heathen country . . ."²¹ While this need to reach out may not have been shared in equal measure or in the same way by all,

19. *Ibid.*, 318.

20. "Thus all through the history of the Mennonite church, no matter of what persuasion, no attitude towards any sin is reflected more consistently and no sin attacked more severely than when it came to sexual transgressions. . . . Investigating into the old Prussian (Mennonite) church records, where every exclusion or ban of a church member was recorded, one got the impression that the thinking and actions of the church councils were exclusively dominated by questions related to sexual transgressions . . . that church discipline was carried out mainly on this level while other sinners got off more easily."—Klassen, *Und ob ich schon wanderte*, 264.

21. Klassen, *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay*, 2nd rev. ed., 1: 426-27.

this concern had a profound impact on the Mennonites themselves as well as on their indigenous neighbors.

THE VÖLKISCH PERIOD²²

With trepidation, yet with a strong sense of urgency, Klassen approaches the topic of the National Socialist period in Fernheim, which he calls *die völkische*²³ *Zeit*. His goal is to tell what happened and to explain how it was possible for it to happen, vowing to refrain from polemic argumentation.²⁴ His sources are the extensive documentation in the archives of Fernheim Colony as well as preceding works on this topic by Postma, Ratzlaff, Thiesen and Neufeld.²⁵ As a late teenager at the end of World War II, he also experienced and observed much of this firsthand, of course.

Klassen develops various reasons for the Nazi movement taking on such magnitude in Fernheim, among them the following: the national and world situation at the time, the experience of the Fernheim settlers under Communism and Bolshevism in Russia, the difficult start in Paraguay, Fritz Kliewer's strong personality and vision of German peoplehood for the Paraguayan Mennonites, the troubling role of Benjamin Unruh, who parted ways ideologically with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in 1933 and the role of the North American Mennonites, including MCC and their workers in Paraguay. Indeed, the role of George Klassen can also be called troubling.

A brief summary of the course of developments: The Fernheim population felt that the Germans had rescued them from the Russian Bolshevik hell in 1930. During their brief layover in Germany enroute to Paraguay they were favorably impressed with Germany. When they arrived in Paraguay the situation was much more difficult than expected

22. For a well documented account of this period in Fernheim history see John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?: Attitudes Among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933-1945* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1999). Pp. 329.

23. The word "völkisch" may be considered a euphemistic alternative for "Nazi" in the context of Klassen's work; "völkisch" does not easily translate into English and is not included in some good German-English dictionaries, such as Langenscheidt, although a recent Herder German-Spanish dictionary translates it as "popular; nacional; racista."

24. Peter P. Klassen, *Die deutsch-völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, 1933-1945* (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V., 1990), 19.

25. Sources quoted by Klassen are the following: Johan Sjouke Postma, "Fernheim, fernes Heim" (unpublished manuscript, 1948); Gerhard Ratzlaff, "An Historical-Political Study of the Mennonites in Paraguay" (M.A. thesis, California State University at Fresno, 1974); John D. Thiesen, "A Case Study of National Socialism among Foreign Germans: Paraguay, 1927 - 1944" (M.A. thesis, Wichita State University, 1985), and Hans (Juan) Neufeld, *Affaire Dr. Fritz Kliewer in Fernheim 1940-1944, "Wie es war?" mit Anhang* (Asunción: the author, 1988 and 1991).

and many were ready to look for a way out. Added to this was the fact that many in their ranks felt betrayed for having been "sold" into the Chaco. Moreover, adding insult to injury, MCC required repayment of the \$250,000 loan incurred in settling the Mennonites there. Enter Fritz Kliewer in 1939 as he returned from four years of study in the German "fatherland." Both Kliewer and Unruh, the long-distance mentor-advisor, promoted National Socialism, equating it with being German. Moreover, Walter Quiring, an earlier promoter of National Socialism in the Chaco, had stated in 1936 that Nazism was equivalent to "positive Christianity." Kliewer held out the possibility of returning to the fatherland (*heim ins Reich*), and this appealed to many in Fernheim, even to many who did not otherwise agree with Kliewer and National Socialism.

Various events led to polarization on the issue, including the perceived interference of the North American Mennonites. Three Old Mennonite missionaries from Argentina went to Fernheim at the request of MCC to investigate the situation and to promote nonresistance, a doctrine which MCC thought was losing ground in Fernheim. When one of the three, Elvin Snyder, said in a public meeting that Nazism was worse than Bolshevism and called Nazism "syphilis of the spirit," the lines became more clearly drawn. Snyder, the critics said, had never experienced Communism and had no right to talk in this manner. Kliewer left the meeting and announced that he would respond to Snyder's obtrusive vulgarity.

Kliewer's personality seems to have played a significant role in shaping the happenings also. He is portrayed as sensing an almost messianic call and seeing everything in terms of black or white. Germany's fight against Bolshevism, contended Kliewer in 1941 when Hitler's army is advancing into the Ukraine, must convince everyone to join the German cause; if some are still unconvinced, "we'll have to provide a bit of help; soon we will have only Germans and non-Germans. . . ." ²⁶

Resistance to Kliewer came from an unexpected quarter and led to the events terminating the Nazi movement in Fernheim—namely from a group of young men, already in their 20's and not yet baptized, but included in the *völkisch* youth work because they were single. When they refused to participate in a folk game as directed by Kliewer, the latter reportedly became very angry, telling the young men that they had to learn subordination, for "if you do not obey a small *Führer*, neither will you obey the great one." ²⁷

26. Klassen, *Die deutsch-völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim*, 81.

27. *Ibid.*, 94.

These young men were not necessarily opposed to National Socialism; in fact, they were greatly concerned that conflict with Kliewer could result in losing the opportunity to immigrate to Germany with the rest of the people who had put their name on the list. The organized Union of Russian Germans in Fernheim, where Kliewer's influence dominated, would not listen to their concerns and pleas. One thing led to another and when the dissidents, with Hans (Juan) Neufeld as their spokesman, seemingly found no other way to make their voice heard, they resorted one night to putting up posters defaming Kliewer. A week later this resulted in a response from the other side, with posters defending him. The Fernheim mayor Legiehn and Kliewer, ostensibly desiring to bring about peace, called a colony meeting to settle the discord. The matter seemed somewhat settled for both sides, and the dissidents were promised a copy of the minutes of the meeting to document that the matter had been settled, which could keep them from losing their place on the list of potential immigrants.

When Neufeld requested a copy of the minutes, however, the request was refused. Such deception on the part of the authorities, the group concluded, gave them the right to break into the colony administrative office to retrieve what had been refused. In the office they did not find the minutes; they found a letter, however, written by Kliewer to Herr Schütz of the National Socialist Volksbund in Asunción, apparently ready to be mailed. In this letter Kliewer bemoaned the lack of progress made in the German cause; in fact, he said, he and Legiehn were ready to leave the colony and give up. Many were not ready to submit themselves to the movement because of religious scruples, the letter reported, and the rest did not go beyond paying mere lip service to it. Neufeld and his group not only took this letter but quickly circulated copies of it in the colony, resulting in great furor. The three-way split that already existed became intensified: those who opposed the movement on religious nonresistant grounds, those who favored the movement but opposed Kliewer, and those who favored the movement and were behind Kliewer. While Kliewer's star was waning, he could still count on majority support at public meetings, however.

In 1942 Paraguay broke diplomatic relations with the Axis powers, meaning that German organizations in Paraguay had to terminate their political activity. Paraguay came more directly under Allied, especially U.S., influence. This did little to stop the ferment in Fernheim, however. Klassen reports: "Interpersonal relations were in such a state and the multi-layered differences of opinion so complex that arriving at an

understanding in a satisfactory manner seemed to have escaped into an unattainable distance."²⁸

Onto the scene came opposition from another source. Suffice it here to mention only the chief plaintiff Abram Martens, a businessman who felt that the colony under the leadership of Legiehn, whom he accused of attempting to consolidate all authority under himself, exercised a business monopoly that put Martens' personal enterprise at an unfair disadvantage. Legiehn resigned in the wake of the controversy.

The situation came to a head on the night of March 11, 1944 when a group decided to demonstrate support for Legiehn and confront Martens. In the struggle six of the Neufeld supporters were beaten up. Two of the MCC workers in Fernheim, John R. Schmidt, a medical doctor, and especially George S. Klassen, a dentist, had already gotten somewhat involved in the situation earlier and this night went over to Fritz Kliewer's house. They reported seeing armed people standing guard there. Dr. Klassen approached Kliewer and laid the blame for all the upheaval and dissent at Kliewer's doorstep, presenting him with an ultimatum: Either Kliewer will leave the colony or else the two of them will leave. Dr. Klassen additionally requested that soldiers be sent to Fernheim for protection.

A few days later the two MCC workers appeared unexpectedly at a colony meeting where Martens was being stripped of his rights as a Fernheim resident. Here Dr. Klassen again told Kliewer that he was responsible for stirring up all the trouble in the colony and that there could be no peace until he and his accomplice Legiehn left. The ultimatum given Kliewer on the night of March 11 was repeated. Additionally Dr. Klassen said that he had already taken steps with the proper authorities to have Kliewer removed. Kliewer and Legiehn promised to leave the colony, and when a Paraguayan military delegation appeared on March 21 accompanied by representatives from the U.S. embassy in Asunción bearing an extradition order for both Kliewer and Legiehn, the two went into exile in East Paraguay.

The situation was now beyond the control of the colony. Some felt disappointment and resignation at the outcome while others were modestly satisfied. People were surprised and rightly asked questions about the propriety of an MCC worker trying to bring the situation under control by requesting the military and the U.S. embassy to come in. Bernhard Wall, the new mayor, summed up the situation when he wrote in a letter to MCC: "We planted wind and we reaped a storm."²⁹

28. *Ibid.*, 103.

29. *Ibid.*, 128.

According to Peter P. Klassen's account, attempts to come to grips in the aftermath with what had happened between 1933 and 1944 centered largely on restoring interpersonal relations; there was little mention of the need to repent for having gone along with Nazism. It must be added, though, that upon his return to Fernheim and his reinstatement as a citizen of the colony, Legiehn said: "The promotion of the *völkisch* movement was a mistake and the resultant consequences were sin."³⁰ But there was no mention that the following or any similar question was asked: What have we learned from this experience? There was no reference, for instance, to any need to take a position against racism, when racism was such a central part of Nazi ideology.

Klassen's own evaluation of the situation is that the events of the 1940s have hardly influenced the 1950s and succeeding decades. He adds, furthermore, that "it seems that, in general, the pressure resulting from the uneasiness about the happenings has led people down the path of suppressing what transpired."³¹ I consider it unlikely that the grandchildren of those who experienced these years in Fernheim, many of whom now live outside of Paraguay, are informed about these happenings.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH INDIGENOUS AND OTHER PARAGUAYANS

The encounter of the Mennonites with the Indians and other Paraguayans is the theme of Klassen's second volume on the history of the Paraguayan Mennonites. This encounter, especially with the Indians, was unavoidable. In fact, most people were little aware of the existence of the indigenous peoples in the area prior to the arrival of the Mennonites. In the early days this encounter was a very new experience, often very direct, personal and involved, as the following story³² told by Frieda Käthler suggests: Kazike Molino and his wife were working in the fields for the Käthlers when the Paraguay military moved in during an incident in the war with Bolivia. Because the Indians had betrayed the Paraguayans to the Bolivians, they were now free game for the Paraguayan soldiers. When Frieda's mother saw two soldiers with loaded guns sneaking up on the two unsuspecting field workers, she called to Frieda, her 11-year-old daughter, to run and warn them. The two escaped and the blame for their escape now rested with the Käthler family. Not wanting to take the young girl who warned the two Indians, the authorities instead took Mr. Käthler and his son to the military post. Fortunately they were soon released because the Paraguayan officer in

30. *Ibid.*, 134.

31. *Ibid.*, 128.

32. Peter P. Klassen, ed., *Kaputi Mennonita*, 3rd ed. (Asunción: n.p., 1980), 117-18.

charge knew and respected Mr. Käthler. Another element in the story as told by Frieda Käthler, illustrating Mennonite involvement in this new environment, was that Mrs. Käthler had once offered to buy one of the unborn babies of Kazike's wife so that she would not kill it. At that time family planning for these Indians consisted of suffocating unwanted children immediately after birth by filling their mouth with sand.

In his volume on this encounter between the very different cultures, the author devotes the first third of it to general background on the different Indian or indigenous groups and their cultures, the Paraguayan people, and church and mission work in general, thus locating the mission efforts of the Mennonites in a broad context. Here Klassen is the teacher-didact who has done the necessary research to set the stage with information ranging from seventeenth-century *reducciones* to Paraguay's one-time policy on intentional mixing of races to the history of church and state relations.

Indeed, the relationships of the Chaco Mennonite churches to their mission field was, and remains to this day, unique in mission history. The "sending" church and the people to whom the church was "sent" physically occupy an overlapping territory. With the establishment of the colonies came an increased migration of different Indian tribes to the Chaco as they looked for sustenance and work. What further added to the unusual situation was that, according to Regehr, "the Indians were anxious and able to selectively evaluate the gospel offered to them and to incorporate it correspondingly into their own culture."³³ And in some cases, as in Menno Colony, the Indians themselves asked for teaching, help and counsel, one concern being their great fear of evil spirits.³⁴

At a fiftieth-anniversary celebration of mission activities in 1985 the churches could record positive results in their efforts to relate to the Indians. In terms of numbers, 4790 Indians had become converted and joined Mennonite churches. Serious questions were raised: What has become of the Indians who have come into contact with Christianity? How have they coped with the cultural change? What are the implications of the fact that the model for the "new life" is not only supplied by the missionaries themselves but also found in contact with ethnic Mennonite communities?

While it may be difficult for the missionaries themselves to differentiate between what is genuinely Christian and what is German Mennonite culture, it is possibly more difficult for the Indians to differentiate between the two. The Indians tend to measure their turning

33. Peter P. Klassen, *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay, Begegnung mit Indianern und Paraguayern*, vol. 2 (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1991), 141.

34. *Ibid.*, 143.

to Christianity very much in terms of "before" and "after," Klassen reports. Testimonies, such as the following gathered from Indian Christians by Wilmar Stahl, document this:

We have it much better today than earlier. . . . We live in peace and are able to plant what we need to eat. We've received a lot of help. When we're sick we can get medicine. But the biggest help of all is that we have received the Word of God, which has turned our life in the right direction so that we can now follow the right way.³⁵

Certain aspects of their former life may persist, albeit in new forms, Klassen realizes. There is a strong belief in miracles (e.g., the belief that pain and suffering can be healed through prayer). This belief may have replaced their earlier belief in the magical arts of the shaman.

While the testimonies of the Indians ring with appreciation for help they have received and continue to receive, the missionaries now challenge them to "look for opportunities where you can be a testimony for God outside of your own churches through mission and Christian service."³⁶

Almost from the beginning the Mennonite settlers were concerned about helping the Indians to change from a wandering or nomadic culture to a sedentary one. Walter Quiring already warned against the "development of a Chaco proletariat . . . that would simply be there for the purpose of providing ambitious German farmers with cheap labor."³⁷ He was also aware of the conflict that could arise out of the difference between what the missionaries preached and how the white settlers lived, causing all efforts to fail. He therefore posited an alternative of locating the Indians in "remote protectorates where the savages could live unmolested in their original ignorance of the whites."³⁸ An eventual encounter between the whites and the Indians seemed unavoidable, however, and at that point the Germans (referring here to the Mennonites), will need to be involved or "they will become guilty of the destruction of their brown neighbors." In this context Quiring can also be credited with the expression *Sesshaftmachung*, i.e., making the Indians sedentary.

Perhaps the first step in *Sesshaftmachung* of the Indians occurred when they began to gather around the larger settlements, especially around Filadelfia and Loma Plata in so-called *Arbeiterlager*, or workers' camps, where they were close to the job market. This is also where the

35. *Ibid.*, 151.

36. *Ibid.*, 155.

37. *Ibid.*, 299.

38. *Ibid.*, 157.

missionary work began. These settlements quickly evolved into the slums of the towns to which they were attached, and it was considered neither a satisfactory nor a final solution in the process of settling the Indians. Realizing, however, that some Indians might not want to settle down as property owners, Mennonites improved these settlements, involving the Indians themselves in decision-making.

Pressure to settle the Indians increased in the early 1960s. With the help of MCC, the anthropologist Jacob Loewen was sent to study the situation.³⁹ Loewen brought to the discussions an awareness of the cultural upheaval experienced by the Indians as a result of the settlement project. He pointed out that the Indians were a traditionally matrilinear culture.⁴⁰ J. Winfield Fretz also brought a sense of cultural awareness to the situation at hand: "During thousands of years he [the Indian] learned that land is to be owned and used in common and that nobody whosoever has the right to buy or sell it."⁴¹ And now they were proposing to make landowners out of the Indian! In spite of such considerations, as the Indians continued to emigrate into the Chaco the movement to settle them could not be stopped.

The process of acquiring land for settlement began, usually in areas adjoining the colonies. Ironically, it was land that only 100 years earlier had been the undisputed territory of the Indians. The cost was high, and MCC as well as the European Mennonites' International Mennonite Organization (IMO) were ready to help. The project succeeded and by 1989 there were 10,014 Indians settled on 97,207 hectares in twelve communities. While MCC and IMO had been the largest financial contributors, international church agencies and missions, as well as the Paraguayan government and the Indians themselves, contributed. The Asociación de Servicios de Cooperación Indígena-Mennonita (ASCIM), representing the combined efforts of the three colonies, was called into being to provide guidance in trying to bring about radical cultural and structural change in this large settlement project. ASCIM helped with the establishment of cooperatives and working with the development of appropriate schools and health services, which included family planning, and social work. On the whole, the institutions developed paralleled those extant in the Mennonite colonies, with accommodations for the Indians' economic status and with some consideration of their cultural preferences. Apparently the infrastructure established by ASCIM and the employment of anthropologist Wilmar Stahl, beginning in 1973, has contributed considerably to a peaceful co-existence among the

39. Klassen uses the German spelling of Jakob A. Löwen.

40. *Ibid.*, 180.

41. *Ibid.*, 170.

Mennonites and the Indians. Klassen says little about attitudes of the Mennonites and the Indians towards each other as they live in this new symbiotic relationship.⁴²

The first intense, albeit involuntary, contact between the Mennonites and Latin Paraguayans occurred with the coming of the army during the Chaco War (1932-1935) with both Menno and Fernheim Colonies serving as deployment and provision bases for the army. In East Paraguay employee-employer relationships developed in the agricultural sector as the colonies were established, with local Paraguayans coming to work for the Mennonites. In the context of mission work, the contact between the two groups was intentional on the part of the Mennonites, of course, but here the playing field differed greatly from that of the Indian-Mennonite relationship. After all, both Mennonites and Latin Paraguayans shared a European orientation and both were Christian, the Latin Paraguayans being Catholic.

The MBs were the first to missionize actively, starting their work in conjunction with Paraguayan Evangelical groups. While they claimed to be tactful in their contact with Catholics, these missionaries saw true faith as lying firmly on the Evangelical side, Klassen reports, as the MBs joined forces with them "to win our nation to Christ."⁴³ Such an approach led to considerable conflict with the Catholics in some areas. By 1987, however, there were 26 MB mission congregations in various parts of the country with a membership of 1350.

Other Mennonite groups and individuals began missionary work and became involved in charitable and outreach work. Mennonites did not experience much overlap or conflict of interests among themselves in their various locations. The most serious conflict arose, according to Klassen, with missionary Heinrich Töws, sent from Canada by the Evangelical Mennonite Church (EMC). Menno Colony had agreed to let him join their work, while the EMC back in Canada was under the impression that he was starting an independent mission project. As Töws struggled for influence, he went to Asunción to talk to the Department of Indian Affairs, where he put the existing Mennonite work in disfavor.⁴⁴

42. See Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors*, 212-15, for a discussion of attitudes of the Indians and the Mennonites towards each other. According to Redekop, the Indians are grateful for help received but somewhat resentful of being treated as second-class citizens. For example, the Mennonites do not eat with the Indians in their homes. According to Gundolf Niebuhr, "Logros y desafíos en la convivencia multicultural," *Suplemento Antropológico* 36 (Dec. 2001), 61, the Chaco Mennonites tend to believe that the Indians' heritage and culture is not only unsuited but also an obstacle to becoming integrated into the market economy and the national culture.

43. Klassen, *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay*, 2:200.

44. *Ibid.*, 232; Klassen writes: "According to a memorandum of the representatives of the Mennonite colonies dated July 1965, Töws had told the government that the mission

This resulted in negative, rather long-term effects for the existing Mennonite mission work. In the wake of this debacle some of the Indians, especially the leaders, became restive and critical of the mission work.⁴⁵

In the background, conflict tended to loom with other-than-Mennonite groups because Mennonites were concerned about forming congregations for those who had been converted and baptized. This caused some disaccord with Catholics and Lutherans. A problem also arose when the Indians moved around and when Catholic missionaries wanted to minister to their members who moved to Filadelfia, where the Indians were mainly Mennonite. In this case conflict was somewhat resolved when the colony permitted a Catholic church to be constructed on the edge of Filadelfia.

In reflecting on the mission efforts of the Mennonites, Klassen raises the question of the interconnectedness of religion and culture. He writes at a time when Christian mission was increasingly accused of ethnocentricity. A document released by a World Council of Churches meeting held in Asunción at that time stated that "the prime task of the church's true mission is to discover the presence of God the Savior, i.e., the place where the Gospel of Christ becomes flesh, among all nations and cultures."⁴⁶

In further reflection, Klassen points out that the gospel message becomes distorted when those who bring the message believe that they are in a culturally superior position over those to whom they bring the message. He arrives at the following verdict: "We have to admit that the original working basis of the Mennonite missions to the Indians in the Chaco was radical missionizing without consideration of the cultural peculiarities of the Indians . . ."⁴⁷ He cites Walter Regehr as a critic of the paternalistic attitude of the Mennonites, and Wilmar Stahl as saying that partnership and respect must dominate relationships in mission work and the Indian settlement projects. Klassen cites opinions of other Mennonite missionaries in the Chaco, representing a wide spectrum on the question of the inculturation of the gospel. On the one hand are those who deny that God was present in any redeeming form among the Indians prior to the coming of the missionaries; on the other hand are others who believe that God as Savior was already present there in some form.

stations did not train the Indians to be good citizens. They were teaching nonresistance, which is at variance with Paraguay's Indian policy."

45. *Ibid.*, 232.

46. *Ibid.*, 246.

47. *Ibid.*, 251.

The section "Indians—Mennonites, a Worldwide Polemic" is a succinct summary of outside opinions of the relationship. The unusual settlement experiment had attracted attention in wide academic circles, and not all of the criticism was positive. The Paraguayan anthropologist and ethnologist Miguel Chase-Sardi had attacked such issues as compulsory birth control, discrimination in wages and compulsory levying of school fees.⁴⁸ There was uneasiness in the colonies about these reports and some questioning of the accuracy of such reports, including Jacob A. Loewen's study. Loewen had, to an extent, based his criticism on interviews with the Indians. The only common language would have been Plautdietsch, which presented a very significant language barrier, considering the low competency of most Indians in this language. On the positive side, Klassen cites several Mennonites who express deep appreciation to the Indians, even indebtedness, for all their hard work in solidifying the colonies' economic basis.

All of these contacts with the outside world—army presence in the colonies during the Chaco War, Paraguayan neighbors, mission, charitable and settlement work directed at the Indians, easy and rapid access to Asunción after completion of the Trans-Chaco highway, business dealings on the national level, etc.—have had a profound influence on a people who considered themselves *die stillen im Lande* dedicated to preserving their faith and their lifestyle. Klassen sums it up in these words:

A dilemma profoundly embedded in the essence of their basic attitude determines the relationship of all Mennonites in Paraguay to the world around them. On the one hand, a conviction prevails that their faith-based and ethnic peculiarity must be cultivated, and that this is best achieved by excluding outside influences. On the other hand, ever-increasing and more demanding situations call for opening up, for permeability and concessions. This results in steps taken towards integration that are often irreversible. Frequently this duality in attitude is not clearly perceived and is felt only subliminally as a form of anxiety.

The dilemma manifests itself in an attitude towards everything that is different: towards the Indians, the Latin Paraguayans and towards everything coming from the outside. This isolationist attitude expresses itself as a defense mechanism wherever new or unusual elements occur and try to gain acceptance and integration into the community organism. The strongest criterion is that of origin, i.e., German Mennonite descent, yet simultaneously the essence of

48. Ibid., 320ff.

communal faith and life demand spiritual and economic expansion, which, in turn, undermine the character of isolationism.⁴⁹

Klassen admits that the Mennonites have made mistakes in their contacts with the outside world; in retrospect it seems clear to him that some of the decisions for settling the Indians were not in the best interest of the Indians themselves. Yet this project is so compelling that it has to move forward. Still he is positive, albeit modestly, in his glimpse towards the future when he concludes the volume as follows: "A sincere and open-minded vision for what needs to be done will be the determining factor [for the future]. It seems that potential recourse to the healthy economic, cultural and spiritual resources of the Mennonite community in Paraguay would cause the way into the future to appear not all that dim, in spite of many unanswered questions."⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

Klassen provides an in-depth insight into the story of the Paraguayan Mennonites. As a life-long participant and keen observer in this milieu, he brings credibility and integrity to his writing. His stories demonstrate empathy and understanding for his characters. He is always willing to see an issue from different perspectives. He is articulate and his German flows with facility. His story-telling skills improve as he continues to write his *Geschichten zur Geschichte*. While we need more research and an expanded history of the Paraguayan Mennonites, especially regarding those who arrived after 1960, Klassen's work on the history of the Paraguayan Mennonites will doubtless remain a classic.

49. *Ibid.*, 338.

50. *Ibid.*, 355.



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