Tracing Anabaptist Roots
by Rodney Hofer, Lawrence, Ks.

I liked working at Menno-Hof. I am a story teller like my father before me. This is a trait learned while growing up in a rural community where “visiting” was a time-honored tradition to maintain oral histories. So, I don’t mind telling the same story ten or fifteen times a day. My friends, to whom I have been known to have repeated a story or two, think that this is the perfect job for me. They hope that volunteering at Menno-Hof will get it out of my system. The visitors to Menno-Hof are unlikely to have heard my stories before although the same cannot be said of the staff or my fellow volunteers.

At Menno-Hof I identify myself as “Mennonite of Hutterite Ancestry.” That generally requires a bit of explanation. My great grandparents, like approximately two-thirds of the 1,250 Hutterites that emigrated from Russia in the 1870’s, homesteaded on the prairies of South Dakota. Those that homesteaded were referred to as Prairieleut or Prairie People. The remaining 450 Hutterite emigrants reestablished the communal life that had been given up during the last decades of their history in Russia and are known as Colony People. They retained the plain dress, traditional beards for men, customs and teachings of the Hutterian Brethren and are the people we identify as Hutterite today. They have multiplied to approximately 50,000 with colonies mostly located in South Dakota, Montana, and the prairie provinces of Canada.

Like my home church, Hutterthal Mennonite, nearly all of the churches established by the Prairieleut eventually affiliated with Mennonite conferences. To signify their primary association, only the word “Mennonite” appeared in the stone arch above the door of their new church building in 1954. Before that, sermons were preached by a lay minister in German. The men sat on one side and the women on the other. On the (cont. on page 2)
Tracing Anabaptist Roots (cont. from front) front rows on the right sat the grandmothers in their old world dresses with black head scarves edged with a small flower print. With a new building and a Mennonite seminary-trained pastor who didn’t even speak German, the church changed rapidly during my youth. The new pastor introduced a printed bulletin with a formal order of service including a call to worship, songs from The Mennonite Hymnal, benediction, and doxology. Young couples started sitting together as families and soon we resembled the Swiss and Low German churches in the community. We had modernized.

For me, Anabaptist history is also family history. My wife, Roberta, and I combine to represent all of the ethnic European Mennonite groups. Roberta’s father descended from Amish that in the late 1700’s migrated east rather than to North America from Alsace and the Palatinate. Initially settling in Galacia at the invitation of the local prince who wanted to improve the agricultural prospects of his domain, they eventually migrated farther east to the Russian province of Volhynia and became Mennonite. Roberta’s mother is Low German Mennonite whose ancestors fled across northern Germany from the Netherlands to the Vistula delta in Prussia and eventually the large Russian Mennonite Molotschna colony. After the Hutterite colony north of Kiev burned to the ground in 1820, the Hutterites also resettled near the Molotschna colony at the invitation of Johann Cornies, the wealthy Low German agriculturalist who took an avid interest in Anabaptist groups. However, with the rescinding of the privileges the Anabaptists had originally been granted by Catherine the Great, all three of these ethnic Anabaptist groups immigrated to America and settled in the prairie states from Kansas to Canada in the 1870’s. Menno-Hof’s John J. Funk exhibit took on new meaning for me when I learned that he was instrumental in some of the Hutterite immigrants wintering in Elkhart, Indiana, in 1874-1875 on their way to South Dakota. Interested in how these immigrants were adapting, Mr. Funk visited them in South Dakota in 1882 and reported on his visit in The Herald of Truth.

I have always liked history and Anabaptist history in particular. Although I had Mennonite history classes at both Freeman Academy (SD) and Bethel College, visiting European Anabaptist sites while serving as an MCC Paxman in Yugoslavia (1969-1971) made this history more vivid. This included visiting the farmstead in Austria from which my Hofer ancestors were deported to Transylvania, along with 14 other families, for being Lutheran in 1756. In Transylvania these families soon left their Lutheran faith and joined the small community of Hutterites.

My interest in Hutterite history was renewed with our son Tim's wedding in Alba Iulia, Romania, in 2010. Tim met Melania, a young Romanian woman, while both were graduate students at the University of Paris – Sorbonne. Knowing that my Hofer ancestors had (cont. on page 3)
**9th Annual Singspiration**

*Sunday, September 10, 5 p.m.*

Come and enjoy a cappella singing of familiar hymns under a tent on the Menno-Hof lawn in the traditions of the Amish Church, Amish Mennonite Church, Conservative Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church USA. There will be ice cream and pretzels following the worship service.

*Bring lawn chairs for seating.* Rain location: Farmstead Inn pavilion, Shipshewana (just north of Menno-Hof)

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**Tracing Anabaptist Roots** (cont. from pg 2)

joined the Hutterites in Transylvania, I researched the Hutterite presence in Romania in anticipation of attending their wedding. About seven miles from the city where Melania grew up is the village of Alwinz where the Hutterite Bruderhof was located from 1622-1767. Unlike the Hutterite Bruderhofs in Slovakia, no remnant of the Alwinz Hutterite Bruderhof remains. However, I did find the ruins of the castle that provided the Hutterites with sanctuary in 1622. In the 1760's the castle was used as a prison by the Jesuits for those Hutterites who would not recant. We also located numerous local historical sites including the orphanage that the Jesuits had built to house the Hutterite children they were planning to abduct. Knowing that the construction of the orphanage was nearing completion in 1767, the small group of remaining Hutterites planned a daring escape, hiring Romanian guides to lead them up hidden mountain trails and over the Transylvanian Alps. Seventy-six Hutterites, forty of whom were recent Lutheran converts deported from Austria, managed to flee certain destruction at the hands of the Jesuits and find safety and freedom of religion within the Muslim-controlled country of Wallachia. Had this small remnant not escaped, the Hutterites would have died out and be a mere footnote in Anabaptist history. As I uncovered story after story of the steadfastness of this small group of Hutterites, I felt I had to share what I had learned. This culminated in a book, *Hutterites in Romania (1622-1767)*, which I published in 2016.

Rodney and Roberta Hofer are retired and live in Lawrence, Kansas, and are members of Peace Mennonite Church. They were volunteer host & hostess at Menno-Hof during the month of June 2017. They have three adult children and two grandchildren. Rod and Roberta enjoy traveling both domestically and internationally. Rod’s vegetable garden is as close as he gets to his agricultural upbringing while Roberta maintains the flower garden. Both enjoy biking and birding when it is not too hot or too cold.

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**School Visit to Menno-Hof | Spring 2017**

Sunny Ridge Amish School, Topeka, Ind., Grades 7 & 8

“We all enjoyed visiting Menno-Hof! Having a place like this is wonderful and is a good reminder to us of all the blessings and freedoms we enjoy here. Your efforts are greatly appreciated. Thank you!” -Jay Lehman, teacher

It was very interesting. The best part was the tornado theatre. It was all worth the time.

-Leland Beachy, Grade 7

I liked everything especially the tornado room. Some of the stuff long ago would be different to live with. -Sharon Miller, Grade 8

I really enjoyed our visit to Menno-Hof. My favorite part was the tornado room. -Julie Renae Chupp

I really liked the barn. It is very interesting how Amish and Mennonites started. I also liked the tornado theatre.

-Justin Bontrager, Grade 7

I liked the tornado room the best. I also liked the ship and everything else. I hope to come by again some time. -James Schlabach
I assume some of you might struggle as I do to stay connected with extended family. This year my brother and I made a commitment to arrange a time for our families to get together in Florida where he lives. It had been approximately 10 years since all of us were together and some of the kids present today weren’t born then. With the help of two great wives we actually pulled it off in spite of all the work, church, sports, music and social commitments many had to manage. Our younger sister and her family also joined us for a portion of the time. We had a great time together!

My wife, Ruth, and I then traveled west to visit some lesser known members of our larger Anabaptist family—the Hutterites. Thanks to a couple who recently joined our Menno-Hof family of volunteers, Rodney and Roberta Hofer, we had contact information for the Wolf Creek Hutterite Colony in Olivet, South Dakota. (Be sure to read Rodney’s cover article in this issue) A young lady greeted us and showed us around the colony.

There are approximately 100 Hutterites living at this colony and it is near capacity. These folks use Acts 2:44-45 as the basic principle for their communal living. Except for a few personal items, all things in the colony are owned by the community and all members are provided for. Families live together but they eat, work, learn and worship as a community.

The Hutterites embrace many of the same core values as Amish and Mennonites—adult baptism, divine trinity of God, and non-violence—to name a few. I encourage you to learn more about this third surviving group of Anabaptists that emerged in the 16th century (in addition to Mennonites and Amish). Books about Hutterite lifestyle, beliefs and history are available in our gift shop.

Blessings on you and your family and cherish the time you have to be together.