

VILLAGE AMONG NATIONS

“Canadian” Mennonites in a Transnational World,
1916–2006

Between the 1920s and the 1940s, the descendants of 10,000 traditionalist Mennonites emigrated from western Canada to isolated rural sections of northern Mexico and the Paraguayan Chaco; over the course of the twentieth century, they became increasingly scattered through secondary migrations to East Paraguay, British Honduras, Bolivia, and elsewhere in Latin America. Despite this dispersion, these Canadian-descendant Mennonites, who now number around 250,000, developed a rich transnational culture over the years, resisting allegiance to any one nation and cultivating a strong sense of common peoplehood based on a history of migration, non-violence, and distinct language and dress.

Village among Nations recuperates a missing chapter of Canadian history: the story of these Mennonites who emigrated from Canada for cultural reasons, but then in later generations “returned” in large numbers for economic and social security. Royden Loewen analyses a wide variety of texts, by men and women – letters, memoirs, reflections on family debates on land settlement, exchanges with curious outsiders, and deliberations on issues of citizenship. They relate the untold experience of this uniquely transnational, ethno-religious community.

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ROYDEN LOEWEN

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Transnational World, 1916–2006

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50 YEARS OF ONTARIO GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF THE ARTS

50 ANS DE SOUTIEN DU GOUVERNEMENT DE L'ONTARIO AUX ARTS

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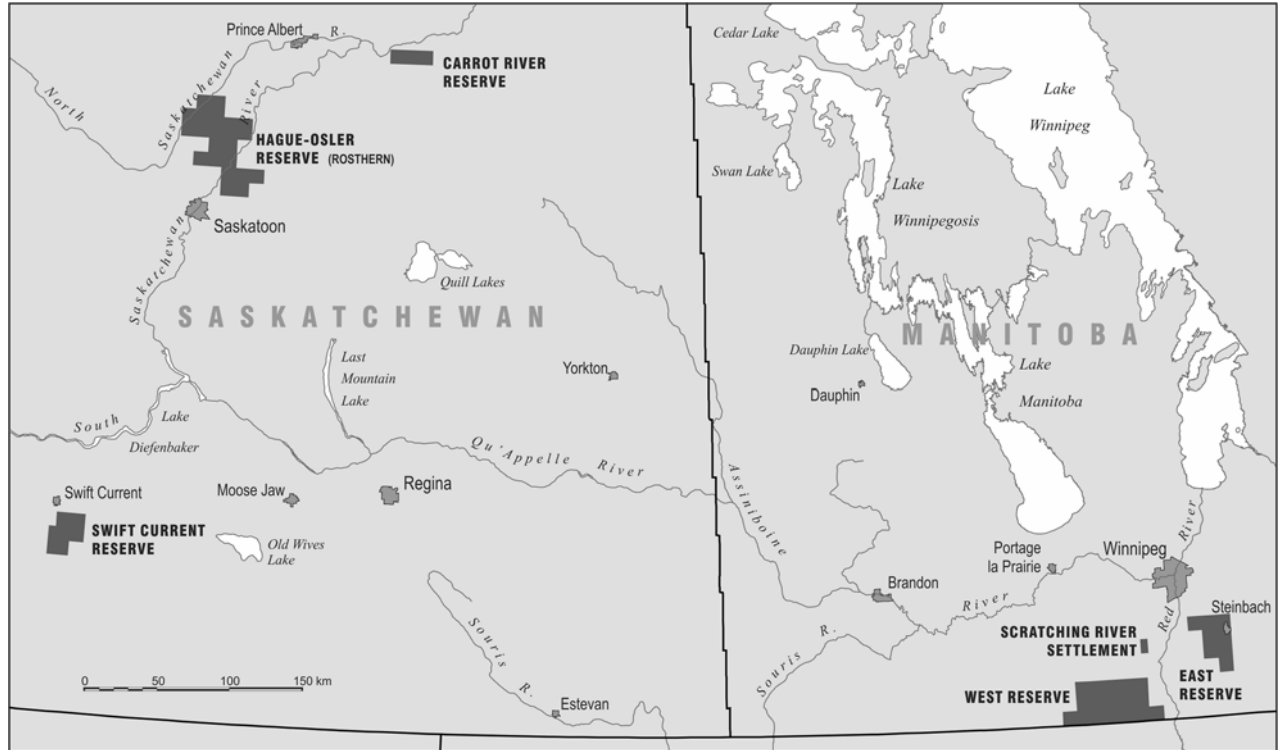
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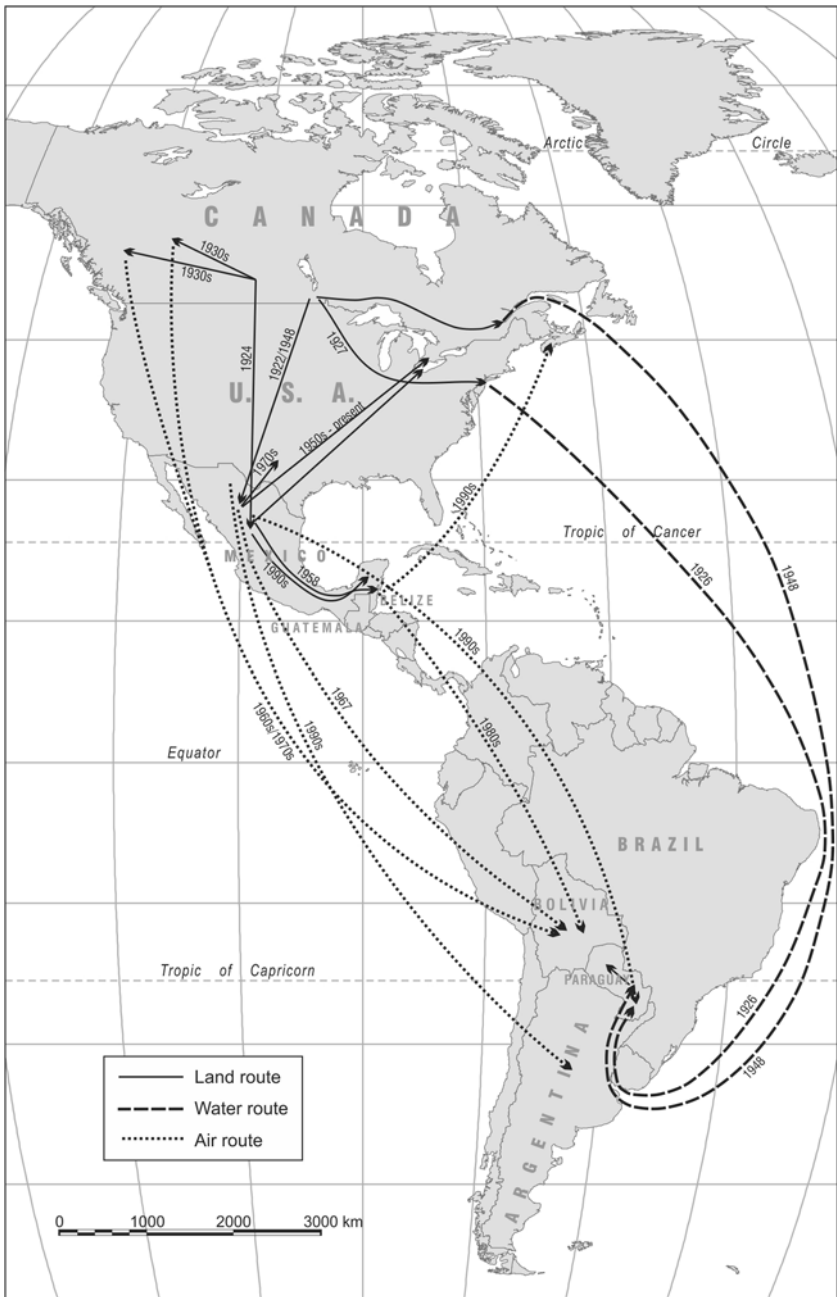
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The “Sending” Communities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan



Selected “Canadian” Mennonite Settlements in the Americas



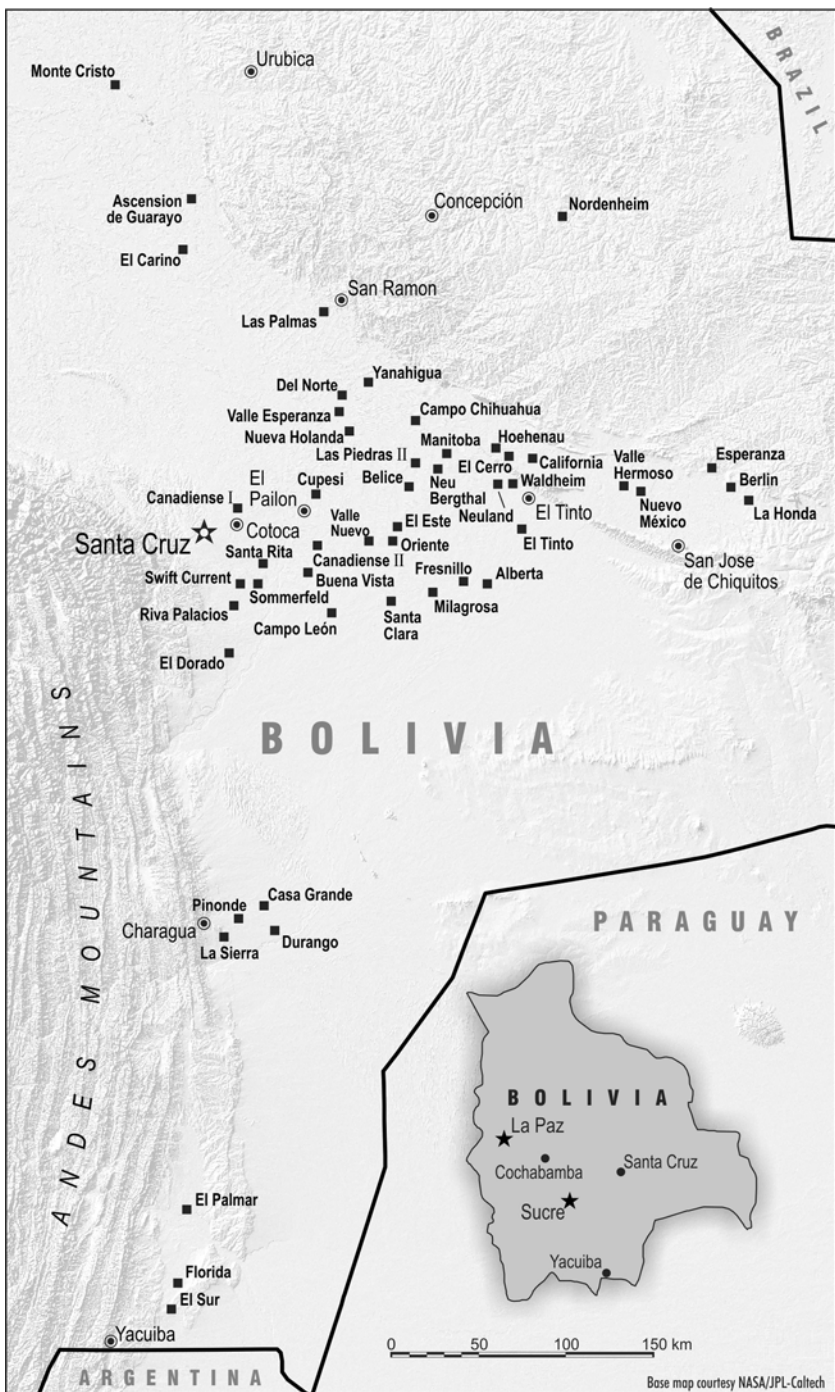
The “Canadian” Mennonite Migrations across the Americas



Mexico Mennonite Communities, 1922 to Present



Paraguay Mennonite Communities, 1927 to Present



Bolivia Mennonite Communities, 1954 to Present

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Introduction

Jakob Wall is an energetic, middle-aged, ex-newspaper man who has returned temporarily to the old red-brick family house in his beloved Mennonite colony in a mountain valley in Durango, Mexico. His wife Neta and seven children are maintaining their other house in Leamington, Ontario, where the oldest of them work at various jobs. In January 2007, I visit Jakob in Durango as he writes a history book on his colony, founded in 1924 by Mennonite settlers from Saskatchewan. Having just left the Old Colony Mennonite church for the more progressive, Canadian-spawned, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church, he is in a cultural transition. He has exchanged the traditionalist black overalls and long-sleeved shirt of the Old Colony Mennonites for modest, but modern, men's garb. Coincidentally, many of the more traditionalist Old Colony members have themselves just left the church at Durango in a searing schism and migrated southward to even more isolated communities in East Paraguay, Argentina, and Campeche (Mexico), where they hope to maintain an anti-modern "horse and buggy" culture. Durango moderates like Jakob may have established homes in Canada, but many other Durango residents have headed in the very opposite direction.¹

Maria Penner is a talkative, Low German-speaking grandmother from the parkland of Northfield, Nova Scotia. With her husband and extended family, she lives here in a settlement of Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites who have moved north from Belize, Central America. The move has occurred in part because of violence in Belize; Maria's cousin, for example, has fled to Texas with his family after being kidnapped and held for ransom by drug lords in the 1990s. In July 2005, as her large family sits at Sunday lunch, Maria, dressed in the long, print dress and black head scarf worn by conservative Mennonites, speaks of her scattered family. Four of her brothers and their families farm at Spanish Lookout Colony in Belize. One brother has returned to Belize

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after a disappointing sojourn in Nova Scotia; another, after multiple stints in Manitoba. Two other siblings have become urban folk, residents of Winnipeg. Many cousins still live in Los Jagueyes Colony in Chihuahua, Mexico. Maria recalls her own many moves – from Manitoba to Chihuahua in 1948, to British Honduras (Belize) in 1958, and now, recently, back to Canada. She finds the departure of her son and his young family for Ontario, where they hope to establish a chapter of the Kleine Gemeinde, especially difficult.²

Isaak Goertzen is a friendly, elderly Old Colony Mennonite minister living at the Mennonite senior citizens' home in La Crete, Alberta's most northerly farming community, surrounded by pristine boreal forest. Isaak seems wary at my unannounced visit in August 2004, but after a conversation in Low German, he responds warmly to my questions about the "Kjampf fe dee Jemeend" (the struggle for the true congregation) and the encroachment of the modern world. He tells me about the migration he led from northern Alberta to the Bolivian lowlands in 1972 to join tens of thousands of Mennonite co-religionists, and then his sad return to Alberta in the 1980s. His stories describe exhilarating air travel, land purchases, pioneer pitfalls, and the eventual abandonment of Bolivia. He keeps to himself the more intricate stories of intra-community conflict during these trying years. But he offers a blessing, as he and his son, an Old Colony church song leader, sing from the Oole Gesangbuak (the note-less, German-language Old Song Book of the Old Colony Church), in lengthy cadences, chant-like sonnets of suffering and faithfulness. Isaak and his son have managed to keep an old tradition alive in modern Canada.³

This book relates a distinctive transnational experience linked to the history of Canada, but also to half a dozen other countries across the Americas. It focuses on specific aspects in the making of an imagined village, a loosely linked pan-American community of some 250,000 Low German-speaking Mennonites. Its inhabitants, many still possessing Canadian citizenship, are the descendants mostly of traditionalist Old Colony Mennonites (but also of four other smaller groups) who emigrated from western Canada in the 1920s and settled in isolated, rural places in Latin America: 6000 chose mountainous northern Mexico; 1700, the Paraguayan Chaco. There they struggled to reconstruct close-knit farm village life as they had known it in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

Over the course of three generations, this migrant community became increasingly scattered; in general terms, undergoing a three-part dispersion. Today, about a third of these Mennonites still live in or near the original settlements founded in Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s.

Another third have travelled even farther south, some from Canada to East Paraguay in the 1940s, but mostly those from northern Mexico, first to Belize in the 1950s, then, beginning in the 1960s to Bolivia, to Argentina in the 1980s, and to southern Mexico's Campeche state in the 1990s. A final third have "returned" north, mostly to Canada, the land of the grandparents, but also to the south-central United States. This scattering, however, is not this simple, and continues to and from each of these places today.

The ninety-year period examined in this book describes these Mennonites as honing a world "among the nations." Socially, they migrated across borders, sometimes with remarkable frequency; they reached back to places from which they came; they pursued "sustained social ties" across borders; oftentimes, they maintained homes in more than one country.⁴ Their culture contained elements of what scholars variously dub the "transoceanic," "transborder," "trans-local," "trans-statal," "supranational," and or even "nationally indifferent,"⁵ but, to my mind, most effectively designated as the "transnational." As such, their lives were shaped by sojourns that dealt directly with various governments along the way, by ongoing struggles with issues of citizenship, and by an ever-present consciousness of life in more than a single nation-state. It is true, they infrequently held dual citizenship, a common strategy of many transnational migrants,⁶ but frequently they held citizenship in one country and resided in another. Most often, they retained a singular Canadian citizenship for multiple generations, moving between North and South America, usually without pursuing either social or cultural citizenship in them. In fact, like some ethno-religious people elsewhere described by Dhiru Patel, Jeremy Stolow, and others, they usually resisted allegiance and emotional attachment to any one country.⁷ They were thus not Mexican Mennonites or Paraguayan Mennonites as much as Mexico Mennonites and Paraguay Mennonites, a subtle, but significant, difference.

This particular approach to the nation-state was expressed in specific ways. Their leaders negotiated directly with national governments to secure guarantees that the Mennonites could live outside or beyond the nation, in village communities shaped by their religious faith and non-violent agrarian ideals. Many experienced Canada not as a benevolent place of refuge, but as a way-station country that seemingly had betrayed them in 1916 with laws forcing them to send their children to English-language public schools even though it once had promised them their own private education system. Most resisted any national

identity whatsoever, cultivating instead a commonality based on their sectarian faith and a history of migration. Their pacifist ways reflected sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch Anabaptist teachings found in old books they carried with them from one continent to another. Their everyday language was a Low German (*Plautdietsch*) dialect acquired in eighteenth-century West Prussia (Poland), but infused with native Dutch and more recently acquired Russian words.⁸ Their evolving ethnic boundaries stemmed from those that defined Mennonite farm communities in nineteenth-century New Russia (Ukraine) and western Canada.⁹ Many wore distinctive clothes adapted over the centuries: the women in lengthy, dark floral-patterned dresses and black kerchiefs; the men, mostly clean-shaven, often in black overalls, almost always in long-sleeved shirts, and never with ties. Most were rural householders who cared deeply about fertile land, considering it as a means to sustain traditional village life rather than as a physical asset belonging to one nation. Over the course of the twentieth century, these Mennonites migrated time and again, when economic need dictated or religious teaching called. With the aid of widely circulated texts – published memoirs, local histories, oral recollections, and especially letters in newspapers – they also developed an especially pronounced, however unusual, identity that linked them to an imagined village superimposed on half a dozen nations of the western hemisphere.

A crucial feature in the making of this particular identity was Mennonite religious teaching on non-violence and nonconformity. In fact, their very migrations sent a religious message: the true Christian must not become too settled in one place, linked to one nation-state, or too comfortable in “this world.” The New Testament message of Romans 12 – “do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world” – was taken to heart, while the counsel of I Peter 2 – “as foreigners and exiles ... abstain from sinful desires” – was interpreted as a call to contest consumer culture and patriotism.¹⁰ They also invoked a common Old Testament motif of living in exile; that is, “scattered among the nations.”¹¹ Although exile of this kind is most often used in Hebrew scripture to denote God’s displeasure and even punishment, these traditionalist Mennonites most often saw it as a virtue, their signal that true citizenship lay beyond the mainstream of this world. They identified first with the close-knit, pacifist Christian community here on earth, and ultimate citizenship lay in a glorious afterworld, in heaven.

If elements of this story are distinctive, others are universal, shared by many millions of twentieth-century migrants, many hundreds of

thousands in Canada. It is an account shaped by economic necessity, ideals of better beginnings in yet other lands, and a willingness to undertake not only one but many moves, often with continuing links in more than one country. Employing the ideas of Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, this story considers how “lives and events have been shaped by processes and relationships that have transcended the borders of nation states.” As such, this account also inherently critiques nation-centric histories, described by these scholars as “rigid and confining,” and rather invokes “metaphors of fluidity, as in talk of circulation and flows ... alongside metaphors of connection and relationship.”¹² These flows constitute endless exchanges of information, evolving memories spoken in ethnic media, and counsel on life in new places. In the end, it is a story of a life referenced to multiple locations and affected by varied geographies. In his recent book titled *Transnationalism*, Steven Vertovec focuses on “ways in which conditions in more than one location impact upon such forms of social organization and the values, practices and structures that sustain them.”¹³ The very act of being on the move and living among nations became a primary defining feature of both these Mennonites and other migrant groups in Canada and, indeed, around the world.

But transnationalism is not only a subject, it is also a methodology or a lens of enquiry, and in this respect, too, this study connects to a wider field of historical enquiry. Isabel Hofmeyr writes that “the key claim of any transnational approach” is not only that it serves “as a theme or motif,” but also includes “an analytic set of methods which defines the endeavor itself” that “direct one’s attention to the ‘space of the flows.’”¹⁴ As a method of historical enquiry, this approach may identify particular, hitherto uninvestigated, events as worthy of study. As Ewa Morawska, Dirk Hoerder, and others have argued, this approach ironically illuminates the local and the seemingly banal in new ways; indeed, these scholars argue that any migration story gains credence when the global and the local are linked,¹⁵ when broader forces are studied for their impact on the local community. The distinctive Low German Mennonite migrant community was, in some respects, merely a variation of what happened elsewhere; in fact, a premise of this book is that its very subject can add insight to the global story of migration.

The general themes outlined in each of the eight chapters identify specific aspects of this broader transborder story. In no respect do they tell a complete story, only a number of crucial aspects of it. [Chapter 1](#) tells of a particular cosmology, as male leaders of emigration expressed

a supra-national outlook, shaping a debate on the relative merits of living in one of numerous countries, and offered to exchange proven economic security in one country for religious well-being in another. [Chapter 2](#) outlines how ordinary migrants expressed a worldview that bypassed the nation in favour of the village, street, and field; they were “trans-local” spaces, reincarnated ethnic enclaves on soil that was seen to belong to no one nation, but to a wider and expansive earth. [Chapter 3](#) relates how, in the context of unexpected troubles, an unmitigated nostalgia for the old homeland developed, leading to second guessing, rigorous debate, and even sharp social rift. [Chapter 4](#) considers how time and space were reshaped – both contracting and expanding – as migrants moved out of the local into the chaos of the wider world, and then became entrenched again in the local, albeit in new lands. [Chapter 5](#) describes ways in which the immigrants presented themselves to outsiders – the national media and international experts – who visited to gaze upon, evaluate, illuminate, and interpret the newcomers’ success in integrating into national economies and global markets. The sixth chapter shows how the immigrants, seeking order within uncertainty, remember their migrations and thus stake their ground as distinctive people in new societies. [Chapter 7](#) outlines a geographic reimagining as migrants tell their stories, mentally turning a constellation of diasporic villages into a single, imagined, inter-continental village ordered by their particular sense of citizenship. The eighth chapter presents the story in the most localized of spaces – the migrant household – and traces the gendered ways in which women link their domestic space to a wider, transcultural world. These eight themes represent significant aspects of all transnational migrant experiences, and of Canadian-descendant Mennonite migrants in particular.

This lens also illuminates the very existence of a subject, perhaps even giving birth to it. A strictly nation-centred perspective, for example, easily excludes or misrepresents entire groups of people when they do not fit a national teleology. Over time, most histories of ethno-religious groups such as the Mennonites have anchored their stories to specific nations.¹⁶ A three-volume *Mennonites in Canada* series and a four-volume *Mennonite Experience in America*, for example, present a history of Mennonites in one country only, even though specific denominations in those countries spilled over the Canada–United States border.¹⁷ Even the most noted anti-modern Anabaptist groups – the Amish and the Old Order Mennonites – are typically discussed within a single nation, whether the United States or Canada.¹⁸ Ironically, the valuable

secondary studies that provide a base for this book are also often nation-centred: they include histories of these traditionalist groups in Canada and Mexico, sociological works on them in Mexico and Paraguay, and anthropological studies based in Belize, Bolivia, and Argentina.¹⁹

This book seeks to illuminate a three-generation-long story of a specific group of Mennonites that does not nicely fit a national story. These migrants were Low German-speaking traditionalists, conservative, conserving or old order in nature, sectarian in their identity, and anti-patriotic, unwilling to become tied to a specific country.²⁰ Historically, they experienced relatively short sojourns in a variety of countries, lived in peripheral regions in those countries, and charted pathways outside even the main Mennonite centres. In the 1870s, when 17,000 Mennonites in Russia contested new military conscription laws, the ancestors of the subjects of this book were among the 7000 more conservative Mennonites who chose to settle in newly created Manitoba rather than farther south in the more economically developed and climatically temperate states of the Great Plains. The simple reason for their choice for Canada was Ottawa's promise of military exemption and block settlement, as well as freedom of private education. That it had made these commitments official in an 1873 Order-in-Council, which the Mennonites referred to as their "Privilegium," a special charter of privileges, was especially important; they firmly believed that the Canadian option would enable them to contest any form of national integration.

This resistance shaped the history of the various subgroups of Mennonites making Manitoba their home in the 1870s.²¹ The largest and most traditionalist of these various groups, the so-called Old Colony Mennonite Church (officially, the *Reinländer* Mennonite Church), was organized upon the arrival of Mennonites in Manitoba in 1875 by settlers stemming from the Old Colony (that is, from the Khortitsa Mennonite Colony, the first Mennonite community founded in New Russia in 1789). This church was founded on a vision of Christ-like simplicity and separation from the wider society, including its public schools and municipal governments. At first, the members of the Old Colony Church settled in the Mennonite West Reserve, one of two major Mennonite block settlements, but in the 1890s they also spread westward, to Swift Current and Hague in that section of western Canada later reorganized as the province of Saskatchewan. Four other smaller, somewhat more progressive, groups also became known for their opposition to any form of nation-centric public education. Three

of these groups – the Sommerfelder from Manitoba's West Reserve, the Chortitzer from Manitoba's East Reserve, and the Saskatchewan Bergthaler from central Saskatchewan – were cut from the larger so-called Bergthaler Church after a painful schism over public education in Manitoba during the 1890s. The smallest group, the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde, had been founded in 1812 in the Molochna (or Molotschna) Colony in Russia over questions of simplicity and absolute pacifism. These five subdenominations stand on the periphery of the Russian Mennonite story, dominated by the much larger and more accommodating progressive General Conference and Mennonite Brethren groups whose histories include immigrant settlements in the United States in the 1870s and Canada in the 1920s. They stand in contrast to the more marginal and traditionalist subjects of this book.

Ironically, the transnational lens of this story also sharpens the very outline of the story of Canada. Historians who have placed Canada's social evolution within a wider global and imperial environment have, in the process, also illuminated how borderland cultures were formed, how migrants became racialized citizens, and how the dominant and the dominated were imagined and structured.²² As C.A. Bayly has argued, nations have always been made in relation to other nations: "The 'nations' embedded in the term 'transnational,'" he writes, "were not originary elements to be 'transcended' by the forces we are discussing," but rather "the products ... of those very processes."²³ The Mennonite diaspora described in this book illustrates Canada's interconnectedness with other parts of the world. In the 1910s and 1920s especially, the young dominion's ambitions of becoming a proud, integrated, and independent power, and not merely a vestige of British imperialism, set it on an ambitious course of assimilating its newcomers to an English-language, nation-centric culture.²⁴ In the 1940s, Canada demonstrated its maturing international membership by a remarkable war effort, underpinned by unprecedented urbanization, industrialization, cultural engineering, and militarization.²⁵ Then, during the second half of the twentieth century, Canada's highly developed economy, relatively open citizenship laws, multicultural policies, and social safety net made it a magnet for newcomers, including workers ordered by an international labour market.²⁶

This broader focus, however, does critique the nation-centred history that celebrates the coming of beleaguered people to chosen shores of hope. The established migration history of Canada may tell of newcomers leaving places of hardship for a democratic, multicultural,

prosperous country,²⁷ but Canada was also a land of emigrants, not only a receiving nation but also a sending one. Over the course of its history, its difficult winters and limited economy sent farmers, labourers, tourists, professionals, and other social groups southward, especially to the United States. A growing literature on twentieth-century emigrants describes especially the thousands of farmers who headed from Ontario to Michigan, from Quebec to New England, from Manitoba to Kansas, from Saskatchewan to Oregon.²⁸ Thousands of other migrants left Canada to return home, especially sojourning, single men from disparate places including Italy, India, Chile, Vietnam, and Kenya.²⁹ Hundreds of thousands of emigrants were passport-carrying Canadians who returned to old homelands with the “golden fleece,” while tens of thousands so-called snowbirds found seasonal refuge in the southern United States, Mexico, and other places in the sun. Within this story, the Low German Mennonite group exodus in the 1920s and subsequent diaspora is a noteworthy subject, as much a part of Canada’s migration history as the myriad accounts of arrivals in Canada. That the Low German Mennonite story includes a “return” to Canada after a two- and three-generation sojourn away makes it all the more Canadian and simultaneously transnational.

Employing this perspective better illuminates the changing nature of migrant cultures over time. Indeed, scholars have suggested that transnationalism is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. Vertovec, noting that many theorists exclude “old” migrations of the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries from the transnational category, argues that one must differentiate “old” and “new” transnationalisms.³⁰ The former registers early twentieth-century realities – return migration, letter writing, split families, chain migration, remittance payments, compelling homeland politics, and diasporic community life. In contrast, the new transnationalism is associated with changes in communication linked to new media connections, inexpensive air travel, multicultural policies, and an increasingly globalized economy. One could add to this list the increasing trend of dual citizenship, multinational family business links, elastic labour markets, economic border zones, and rapid highway-based transportation.

A three-generational history of the “Canadian” Mennonite diaspora in the Americas exemplifies this increasingly complex world, not only as a juxtaposition of the old and the new, but as an evolving social space over time. A globalizing economy and ever-speedier travel technologies simultaneously sent communities to the far corners of the

Americas and created closer bonds among the dispersed. In the same way that this book's eight chapters illustrate specific building blocks of the transnational experience, they also demonstrate how it gained traction over time, evolving from an old to a new version of international linkage. The first two chapters mark unilinear movement, the story first of Mennonite leaders charting a path from Canada to Latin America, then of the emigration of the people themselves. The next two chapters continue this theme, commitment to life in Mexico and Paraguay despite a sharp exchange of ideas on the benefits and pitfalls of a return to Canada, and then a smaller echo migration from Canada to East Paraguay and northern Mexico during the late 1940s. The last five chapters, though, outline more intense international linkage and multivariate identities, a new transnationalism affected by improved technology, global commodity and labour markets, and repeat migrations. The post-war migration to British Honduras and Bolivia illustrates the ironic symbiotic relationship of a Mennonite search for isolation and globalizing economies. The sustained return to Canada during the second half of the century underscores the importance of a global labour market, while the outlines of pan-American diaspora link it to new technologies of inexpensive air travel and more elastic citizenship laws. The final chapter on the translocal worlds of Mexico Mennonite women in southern Ontario identifies the importance of American interstate highways, a Canadian social safety net, and provincial immigrant services in creating even closer links between Canada and Latin America.

Finally, the transnational turn clarifies the importance of specific texts and the flow of their circulation in the making of an identity. In this regard, Isabel Hofmyer highlights "the movement of objects, people, ideas, and texts," especially "popular media and its global distribution and circulation."³¹ Such texts may include media of great circulation, but also localized texts created by the migrants themselves or non-migrant observers. The interrogation of these specific documents illuminates the migrant imagination, the groups' lines of power, their sense of order, and the impact of government policies and global economies in their lives.

This book is based on a specific set of publicly accessible texts, each created by the migrants or direct observers. It begins by considering the memoirs and diaries of Mennonite leaders who sought to shape the religious thinking of a diasporic group. It then analyses hundreds of letters written by settlers in Mexico and Paraguay and published in a Canadian-based, German-language, immigrant newspaper, *Die*

Steinbach Post, and, to a lesser degree, in English-language rural weeklies located in sending communities. It also queries national newspapers in Belize and Bolivia, as well as contemporary fieldwork by visiting American and Canadian graduate students in the disciplines of geography, economics, and anthropology. Two of the final chapters consider narratives produced by oral history, projects that, in 1979 and 2006, respectively, asked Ontario residents about the experience of international migration, about diasporic mindsets, and about adaptations to new lands. Another chapter is based on letters to a recently established immigrant newspaper, *Die Mennonitische Post*, begun by a Canadian Mennonite service agency that inadvertently facilitated the creation of a particular public, that of a transborder Low German peoplehood. While these disparate texts cast light on specific moments in the story, they also give voice to a people who transcended national boundaries.

The story that unfolds in these pages, then, is both unique and universal. It is unique in that any early twentieth-century emigration from prosperous Canada to the underdeveloped countries of Mexico and Paraguay is unusual. The idea that an immigrant would make an economic sacrifice for a specific cultural goal seems strange in a world where middle-class values seem to dictate most social action. Even within the Mennonite world, where non-violence, simplicity, and community cohesiveness tend to shape an ethno-religious self-awareness, the old Anabaptist idea of being “pilgrims and strangers,” contesting nationalist lures, has largely disappeared. This story, it would seem, has few counterparts in the modern world.

Yet, in other ways, this story is universal. It can clarify the qualities of any modern nation-state, Canada in particular, by asking how the imperative of national unity and national integration into a globalized economy affect localized cultures. In more general terms, it can illustrate how such modernization affects vulnerable people who do not possess sophisticated cultural or economic defenses. It also sheds light on how these identities are created, how they change over time, and how the very manner of telling their stories affords some measure of agency to peripheral people. Finally, it reveals that collective identities are never exclusive. Local communities, regions, or nations may seem like distinct categories of study, but in fact they are intertwined – with each other and with wider worlds – in more ways than one can imagine. To trace these various currents, these dynamic connections across the Americas, is to describe each society to the other.

1 Leaving the “British Empire” in Canada: Promises in the South, 1916–1921

In his memoir recounting the emigration of Old Colony Mennonites from Canada to Mexico in the 1920s, Isaak M. Dyck emphasized the effect of the 1916 school legislation in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.¹ These laws, a product of the heady and patriotic days of the First World War, gave the government the power to determine what Mennonite children would learn in school. The Canadian federal government had exempted the pacifist Low German Mennonites from military service, but the two provincial governments pressured them in new, systemic ways.² The school legislation, wrote Dyck, entailed more than a simple curriculum change: it grew from “an inextinguishable enthusiasm for the art of war” and planned that “militarism be instilled in every child.” Mennonite children were to learn the rallying cry of “one king, one country, one fleet, one flag, one all-British empire: love and sacrifice for the Fatherland,” and soon, “even the Mennonites were going to be made into ‘100 percent Canadians.’” According to Dyck, the Mennonites’ only option was to leave the Dominion of Canada, rooted as it was in the hegemonic, imperial culture of the “all-British Empire.” Religious rebirth and commitment could occur only in exile, well removed from a land most Canadian Mennonites had come to call home.³

As Dyck saw it, the Mennonites needed to search for a particular kind of land, because a further problem with Canada was that its wealth and middle-class culture were beginning to transform their simple agrarian ways.⁴ Dyck related the mystical experience of another Mennonite minister, Jacob Wiens of Saskatchewan, in 1913, significantly just a year before the outbreak of the First World War. Outside the village of Reinland, “while looking out over a field ... of swaying wheat with its

beautiful ears," Wiens had heard "a voice come from above, saying ... 'You will not be able to stay here [in Canada] forever; the [Mennonite] church will once again have to take up the walking staff.'" When Wiens asked, "but where to?," "in his spirit he received the following answer: 'if the church wishes to maintain itself in the pure gospel, it will once again need to settle among a heathen people.'"

Perhaps in 1874, when the first Mennonites migrated from Imperial Russia to western Canada, they had found in its frontier lands a chance to rebuild their farm villages in "simplicity and humility." But the wealth of Canada intervened: houses grew larger and buggies more elaborate, commerce took off, the learning of English followed and then, too, the temptation to accept the nation's schools, resounding with patriotic language of empire and war. A "heathen" land denoted a primitive and strange place, one far removed from the comforts of Protestant, white, Anglo Canada. Only in such a land could the Mennonites secure their cultural independence and eternal salvation.

Dyck's memoir was written in Mexico in the 1960s when he was an elderly *Ältester* (bishop or lead minister) of the large Old Colony Mennonite Church. It was an evocative retrospective, a history lesson recounting the difficult exodus from Canada and pilgrimage to Mexico in the 1920s.

Four other texts by leaders, all extensive daily diaries, offer a somewhat less emotional and more quotidian perspective. The first is a "church diary" by Peter R. Dueck of Steinbach, Manitoba. As the *Ältester* of the small *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonite group, Dueck kept a record of the regular meetings of the church's Ministerial Council (the *Lehrdienst*, consisting of the *Ältester* and the ministers), and of the church's Brotherhood assembly (the *Bruderschaft*, a voting body consisting of all baptized males), from 1901 to 1919, the year Dueck died during the Spanish Flu. A second diary is a personal writing of farmer David Rempel of Swift Current, Saskatchewan, who was chosen by the Old Colony Mennonites to join a land-scouting delegation to Brazil and Argentina in 1920. A third diary is a more reflective account by Johan M. Loepky, an Old Colony Mennonite minister from Hague, Saskatchewan; he recalled the final scouting trip to Mexico in 1921 and the historic negotiation for a charter of privileges (or, as Mennonites called it, their *Privilegium*) with Mexican president Álvaro Obregón. A fourth diary, by farmer Bernard Toews of Altona, Manitoba, and a member of yet another church group, the Sommerfelder Mennonite

Church, records in remarkable detail the final scouting trip to South America, an exhausting five-month foray into Paraguay in 1921, with a side trip to Mexico.

The five texts – one memoir and four diaries – reveal a religious understanding that emphasized the biblical idea of being “foreigners and exiles” or “pilgrims and strangers.” They convey their authors’ intricate knowledge of government and agriculture, and, in several cases, an intense curiosity about the cultures of new lands. Each, however, is undergirded with the biblical premise that the true Christian must not “be conformed to this world” and must chart a life beyond the mainstream culture of the nation-state.

Most of these writings, implicitly or explicitly, created a dichotomy between danger in Canada and redemption in Latin America. Each offered to interpret the historical moment when Canada imposed its “imperialistic” culture on the anti-modern, conservative Mennonites. No doubt, the writings reinforced the male authors’ positions as leaders within an overtly patriarchal church, but, as the authors were members of a minority group within nationalistic Canada, their writings also reflected the aims of the dispossessed, or at least those of members of a group on the periphery of mainstream, middle-class society. Ironically, Sidonie Smith’s feminist vocabulary describing autobiographies that “resist memory,” “talk back,” and critique “certain teleological itineraries” may also describe the writings of these patriarchal leaders of an ethno-religious minority out of step with modernity.⁵ Perhaps the Mennonite leaders shored up official, church-based memory, but they rejected an official, sanctioned, national memory that heralded imperial culture, a militaristic masculinity, and middle-class ideals. To employ Julie Rak’s description of radical pacifist, even anarchist, Doukhobor writers, these Mennonite writers can be said to have “‘trouble[d]’ the idea of Canada as a nation with an unproblematic history ... foreground[ing] nationhood itself as a problem that preserves some form of injustice.”⁶ And they brought their texts into conversation with historic writings, not in dissimilar fashion to practitioners of *Agudat Israel*, an anti-Zionist orthodox Jewishness, described by Jeremy Stolow as conceiving “of collective Jewish existence based on cosmological explanations of the state of Jewish exile in the world, as had been elaborated in centuries of canonical writings.”⁷

Perhaps a narrative of Canada’s growing “sense of power” within the British Empire and steady evolution to full nationhood was celebrated by British-Canadian writers, but, to members of minority

religious groups such as the Mennonites, nationalism was problematic.⁸ Mennonite leaders in 1916 and its aftermath wrote to explain how they resisted assimilative legislation and how they took up the "walking staff" to resist a powerful cultural incursion into their close-knit worlds. The idea of migration to foreign countries as "strangers in this world" infused these writings. A transnationalism in this instance arose not as an economic consequence of a global economy or rising technologies,⁹ but as a religiously informed, financially unfavourable resistance to an incipient nationalism and rapidly encroaching modernity.

Isaak Dyck: A Sermon against Canadian Patriotism

Dyck's memoir was written in German and published in two volumes in 1965 while he resided in Manitoba Colony in Chihuahua, Mexico. Distributed among fellow Old Colony Mennonites throughout the Americas, Dyck's narrative offered an Old Colony Mennonite interpretation of historic events, but one penned with the specific aim of reviving a simple, separate world just as forces of modernity were undermining his church. He was not only the historian, but also the preacher whose memory of the 1920s-era emigration was linked to a plea for a return to old values in the tumultuous 1960s. And, as with any sermon, it was anchored in myriad biblical references.

Dyck's first and foremost point was that the true Mennonite was an "alien in this world," and that, collectively, the Mennonites resembled a modern children of Israel. As such, they chose a difficult pathway. Dyck called his readers to immerse themselves in the *Martyr's Mirror*, the classic 1660 history of persecution endured by the sixteenth-century Anabaptist ancestors of the Mennonites. The book taught the life-altering lesson that the "followers of Jesus were ... born into sorrow, suffering and persecution" and that their calling was to "walk in all humility and lowliness."¹⁰

This imperative described the migration of the 1920s to Mexico. The emigrants ultimately had been strengthened by the troubling events of the First World War in Canada, a time when "God ... wanted to test his church ... like gold in a fire." Indeed, the threatening school legislation engendered in the Mennonites a new, refined loyalty to the old idea of a visible, separate, steadfast community of non-violent believers.¹¹ The emigrants, Dyck implied, had exerted their "freedom of conscience" and expressed an authentic faith; of them it could not be said, "as the Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah: 'these people come near to me

with their mouth ... but their hearts are far from me.”¹² Their action had been informed by true religion. Indeed, propelling them to take this costly step was their sacred baptismal vow, when, as young adults, each one had “promised God obedience to the faith with their hearts and mouths.”¹³ God’s truth, declared Dyck, did not require an elaborate, culturally sophisticated worship, but simple obedience. Elaborate theologies were useless, for “truth is never more beautiful than when it appears totally naked and simply free of human understanding or worldly teaching.”¹⁴ Such devotion was the very foundation of the community.

Dyck’s retrospective sermon placed the 1920s migration in a wider historical context. He linked it first to the ancient exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt; like the Israelites, the Mennonites had been divinely guided to begin wandering, leaving Canada for a promised land, and their inherited faith had served as their own “clear pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night,” leading them “through the cruel desert of life.” Dyck also related the migration to sixteenth-century Mennonite suffering: the faith of “Menno Simons ... [and] our ancestors ... was so firmly based on the path of the cross that they had no doubt that a pilgrim who had followed the path until the end would finally arrive happily at upper Zion.”¹⁵ Like the “thousands of martyrs” of the sixteenth century, the emigrants of the 1920s were following Christ in “footsteps of grief,” a pathway that took the Mennonites from one country to another, and ultimately to eternal life in heaven, the figurative “upper Zion.”¹⁶ Indeed, the migrants of the 1920s were part of a grand narrative of Mennonite diaspora: true religion, wrote Dyck, “has only been spread through the walking staff, namely from Holland to [northern] Germany ... [to] Russia ... to America and Canada, and from Canada to here, our present home in Mexico.”¹⁷ The message was clear: the Old Colony Mennonite migration was encased in profound meaning.

Dyck saw a particular parallel between the 1920s emigration from Canada and the 1870s exodus from Russia. “Faith, love and hope in God,” insisted Dyck, had enabled “our fathers, elders and teachers ... to leave their dearly beloved home and fatherland, Russia” in 1875 even as compromising, short-sighted Mennonites who stayed behind scoffed at the pilgrims leaving for the Canadian wilderness. Most importantly, as Dyck saw it, both migrations had been divinely ordered and protected.

His own mother’s stories of the 1875 migration to Canada, given credence with reference to the veneration of mothers in Jeremiah 15,