

Mennonite Historian

A PUBLICATION OF THE MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTRE and THE CENTRE FOR MB STUDIES IN CANADA



Otto Klassen Productions available through a minimum \$30.00 donation to the Text to TerabytesProject. (See further details on p. 2)

Text to Terabytes – Collaborating Mennonite Archives Launch New Project

By Conrad Stoesz

The Mennonite Heritage Centre (MHC) and the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (CMCS) have launched a new joint fund raising project dubbed Text to Terabytes. The fund will help fund the intake of archival records in a vast array of ever changing digital formats, so that stories important to the

Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren history can continue to be preserved.

Technology is rapidly changing. Archivists world over are struggling to know and predict the best practices, standards, equipment, and formats in which to preserve material. Some experts speculate that the last few decades will be

some of the poorest documented periods of history because the information created or the media it resides on will not stand the test of time.

At the centre of this fund raising project is a generous gift of films by internationally respected filmmaker Otto Klassen. Klassen has spent a lifetime documenting Mennonite history through the lens of a film camera. The two denominational archival centres that serve Mennonite Church Canada and the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches together with a private donor are providing funds to make distribution copies of seven titles of Klassen's works. For a minimum donation of \$30 to the Text to Terabyte project, donors can receive one title of Klassen's works.

Klassen, a Russian-born Mennonite and self-taught film producer, has over 50 films to his credit in his 35 plus years as a film producer, many of which contain rare archival footage from European archives. His goal has been to preserve and give access to some of the amazing stories of the Russian Mennonite people.

Klassen's films cover the Russian Mennonite story in Prussia, Russia, Canada, Mexico and Paraguay. His best known film is the two-part *Great Trek*, documenting the flight of Mennonites out of Russia to Germany during the Second World War. He has worked in several languages including English, High German, Low German and Spanish. In 2007 he received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Winnipeg.

Klassen lived through the devastating Ukrainian famine of 1932-33, the horror of war in Europe and survived the hardships of pioneer life in Paraguay. He witnessed the Soviet propaganda films of the 1930s and the German military creating documentaries during the Second World War. At an early age, he understood the power of story told through motion pictures. He also saw how film could be used to tell the truth or to cover up the truth.

After arriving in Canada he worked as a brick layer but continued watching, observing, and analyzing motion pictures and their structures. Today he uses some of the most up to date digital technology in his ongoing story telling endeavors.

Klassen's drive to preserve and provide public access to the archival records aligns with the core mandates for the two Winnipeg based national Mennonite archival centres. But in today's digital

(cont'd on p. 2)

Text to Terabytes

(cont'd from p. 1)

world preserving and providing access is becoming more complicated. Creating and providing digital versions of archival materials offers convenient access to rare materials. However managing and preserving the digital version along with the original format demands more human and material resources. Digital storage space, staff time, and equipment are needed. Increasingly, inquirers are asking for and expecting prompt service, with digital results to be sent electronically.

In addition, the Centres are also receiving records in native digital format and need to access technologies and devise durable practices to ensure retrieve-ability of such information in the future.

For these reasons the Mennonite Heritage Centre and the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies have strengthened their partnership and embraced the gift of the Klassen films for the Text to Terabyte project. Plans are also in the works to give the Centres a more national profile though this project. We encourage you to contribute so that together we can strive to provide long term solutions to keep our history accessible.

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Otto Klassen Productions Available in DVD format

For a gift of \$30 or more ask for one of the following Otto Klassen titles and support the Text to Terabyte project. Other titles available upon request.

Remembering Our Mennonite Heritage traces the origins of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement and the migration of the persecuted Anabaptist believers to Polish-Prussia in the 16-th Century. 250 years later, over one half of these Prussian Mennonites respond to an invitation of the Russian Tsars to settle in southern Russia (in what is now Ukraine) in the years 1789 to 1836; and in central Russia from 1853-1870. Here, Mennonites established prosperous agricultural villages with their own administrative and educational systems, their own hospitals, welfare and insurance programs. The "golden years" of this Mennonite Commonwealth came to an end with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. 2007 production, 45 minute DVD.

Prairie Pioneers: The Mennonites of Manitoba (1874-1974) is Klassen's first full length film produced in 1974. The film recreates various aspects of pioneer life, such as the building of sod huts (*zemlin*), and the arrival of Russian-Mennonite settlers at the junction of the Red River and Rat River in 1874. It also includes footage of Manitoba Centennial Celebrations of 1970 in various Manitoba Mennonite communities, including the first ever visit of members of the Royal Family – Queen Elizabeth, Prince Philip and Prince Charles – to a Mennonite village in Canada and the visit of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to Steinbach. Other Centennial events presented in the film include a hymn sing and choral festival in Winnipeg's Centennial Concert Hall, a large Mennonite gathering at the Winnipeg Arena, and celebrations in Altona and at the Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach. 1974 production, re-mastered in 2007, 43 minute DVD.

Remembering Russia 1914-1927: War and the end of Mennonite Tranquility. The Mennonites in southern Russia, present-day Ukraine, had become affluent. They worked hard in their tight-knit communities, bound by a common language and faith. The level of cultural and social achievement had surpassed their Russian neighbours. For most Mennonites, life was what they made it, largely undisturbed by national or international events. That all changed with the beginning of World War I in 1914. Political, social and economic events in Russia had eroded the authority of the Tsarist regime in the year's leading up Russia's entry into the war. Dissatisfaction with the regime and Russia's military performance in the war eventually led to the 1917 Russian Revolution. A bloody civil war followed, churning through the country and ending the Mennonite's way of life. Farms, enterprises and churches were expropriated and families died at the hands of marauding anarchists. As their world crumbled

around them, thousands of Mennonites fled to Canada. 2006 production, 43 minute DVD.

Remembering Russia 1928-1938: Collectivization and Mass Arrest. This DVD documents the spiritual battles and sufferings of Mennonites in Soviet Russia from the introduction of the first Five-Year Plan in October 1928 to the end of The Great Terror in 1938. Soviet plans for the complete collectivization of agriculture, the elimination of so-called 'kulaks' and the closing of all churches struck a hard blow to the traditional Mennonite way of life. Thousands fled to Moscow in a desperate attempt to leave the Soviet Union; others risked the perils of crossing the Amur River into China in order to escape the 'Red Paradise.'

Some 6000 Mennonites were able to leave the Soviet Union. Of those who remained, many suffered the fate of exile to the forests and mines of Northern Russia, Siberia and Kolyma, where they provided cheap, unpaid slave labour for the state. Life in the collective farms was a constant struggle. Hundreds died during the terrible famine of 1933. Thousands of men and even some women were rounded up by the secret police and exiled to labour camps or simply shot. 2007 production, 52 minute DVD. Note: also available in German **Erinnerungen an Russland, 1928-1938: Kollektivierung und Terror.**

The Great Trek: Part 1 (1939-1943). Winnipeg film-maker Otto Klassen uses rare archival photographs and film footage from the German Bundesarchiv to document the effects of the Soviet-German Non-aggressive Pact (August 1939), the German invasion of the Soviet Union (22 June 1941) and the subsequent two-year occupation of Ukraine on Soviet-Germans and Ukrainians in general and on the Mennonite villages of the Khortitsa and Molochna Settlements in particular. 1992 production Re-mastered in 2007, 35 minute DVD.

The Great Trek: Part 2 (1943-1945). Winnipeg filmmaker Otto Klassen uses rare archival photographs and film footage from the German Bundesarchiv to document the westward retreat of over 350,000 Soviet-Germans and Mennonites in Fall of 1943, their resettlement in German-Occupied Polish territory, and their eventual flight from advancing Red Army forces in the early months of 1945. 1992 production, re-mastered in 2007, 39 minute DVD.

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