

MENNONITE LIFE

JUNE 1985



In this Issue

Our June issue again features the Radical Reformation and Mennonite Bibliography. The 1984 bibliography matches the record size of the previous year. Herbert Giesbrecht, a new contributor this year, has submitted entries from the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Winnipeg. The source(s) of each entry is (are) again identified.

Menno Schrag reflects upon his personal association with H. P. Krehbiel, one of the most enigmatic Mennonite leaders of the early twentieth century. Krehbiel, a son of Christian Krehbiel, served as a historian and leader of the General Conference Mennonite Church. H. P. Krehbiel's career included a great variety of activities as an entrepreneur, state legislator, minister, publisher, and peace activist. Schrag provides insights into Krehbiel's management of the Herald Publishing Company, where Schrag served as assistant editor and editor of the *Mennonite Weekly Review*. Schrag is retired and resides in Newton, Kansas.

A century after the publication of her first book, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale der Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten* (1884), Anna Brons remains among the most significant female historians of the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement. Mary Sprunger discusses the contribution of Brons to Mennonite historiography and provides an original account of the relationship between Brons and Ludwig Keller. Keller, an archivist in Munster and at the *Staatsarchiv* of Berlin, founded the Comenius-Gesellschaft to study the connections between the Anabaptists and old evangelical brotherhoods. Brons and Keller united in their effort to recover the vitality of sixteenth century Anabaptism. Mary Sprunger graduated from Bethel College in 1984 with degrees in history and German, and this article is excerpted from her Social Science Seminar study. Next fall she will begin graduate studies in history at the University of Illinois.

The price of *Mennonite Life* last increased in June, 1982, and rising costs have resulted in insufficient income to cover publication expenses. Thus subscription rates will go up for renewals after September, 1985. The rate for one year will increase from \$8.00 to \$10.00, and the price for two years will rise from \$14.00 to \$18.00. Subscriptions expiring in September may be renewed at the old prices.

MENNONITE LIFE

June, 1985 Vol. 40 No. 2

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Front Cover

H. P. Krehbiel, 1922

Back Cover

Title page of A. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale der Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten*

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Mennonite Weekly Review, p. 9; Mennonite Library and Archives, front cover, pp. 4,5,7,11, and 12.

MENNONITE LIFE is an illustrated quarterly magazine published in March, June, September, and December by Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas. Second Class postage paid at Newton, Kansas 67114.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: One year, \$8.00; Two years, \$14.00 (U.S. Funds).

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H. P. Krehbiel: As I Remember Him

by Menno Schrag

I am greatly indebted to H. P. Krehbiel. He gave me an opportunity. An opportunity, the dimensions of which exceeded anything I could have imagined, expected, or considered myself capable of fulfilling.

The other side of the coin is that the structure and mechanism he brought into being for pursuing the opportunity was faulty and inadequate; inadequate in its concept of personal and public relations and industrial operation. Somebody else had to reshape it or build entirely new.

As a man of public stature, Krehbiel has been both underrated and overrated. Already in his early manhood Krehbiel established a variety of enterprises, some of which were unsuccessful, others of considerable importance. He once told me one of his first undertakings was operating a farm supply and wagon shop in Halstead (Ks.), where he sold wagons at a net profit of one dollar each.

His real interest, however, went in other directions. At age 19, in the early 1880s, he began his college career, attending Kansas State Normal School, Kansas University, and later Oberlin (Ohio) College, where he studied theology, preparing himself for the ministry.

It was during his last year at Oberlin (1897) that he wrote his best and most widely respected book, *History of the Mennonite General Conference*. Many years later, he personally presented to me (with a bit of ceremony) an autographed copy.

After pastoring the Canton (Ohio) Mennonite Church for five years (1895-1900), he moved to Newton, Ks., where he spent the rest of his life. For some fifteen years, up to 1920, he was involved in a variety of publishing



Henry Peter Krehbiel

and bookselling ventures. Among these were *The Review*, a short-lived (1899-1904) semi-religious newspaper; *Der Herold*, a German family paper, which circulated quite widely among German-speaking Mennonites in the Middle West, and the Herald Book and Publishing Co., located in Newton at 508 Main Street, until it was destroyed by the great fire of August 4, 1914, which destroyed a large part of the 500 block on Main Street. The publishing company reestablished itself in a new building in the 700 block on North Main and in 1920 relocated at 107 East Seventh Street.

H. P. Krehbiel spoke to me of his Kansas State legislature experience only in passing. His continuing interest in politics was, however, quite obvious from his analytical assessment of public affairs and in his writing and decision-making. He considered himself as somewhat of a lawyer as was apparent in his business dealings and especially when he served as one of the conciliators in the then widely-publicized Hopefield Church dispute.

Krehbiel served on several conference boards and committees, and during the 1920s was pastor of the Burrton (Ks.) Mennonite Church. Perhaps his major accomplishment—a cause to which he intended to devote most of his time and effort—was the founding of the Herald Publishing Co. in 1920. In his own words, the purpose of the new corporation was “to supply such specialized literature as will meet the needs of Mennonites of the Central West . . . religious and wholesome books for home and church;” but particularly, to revive and continue publication of *Der Herold* and, as soon as feasible, establish an English counterpart of *Der Herold*. This was accomplished in 1923 by the launching of the *Mennonite Weekly Review*.

The Herald Publishing Co. began rather auspiciously, with some three hundred supporting members and a board of directors consisting of prominent central Kansas church elders and a Bethel College professor. But problems soon began to develop. The new *Herold* editor and book store manager, C. Frey, a former Coy, Oklahoma preacher and missionary, was well-liked as an editor, but, in Krehbiel’s judgment, was deficient in management ability. His chief transgression was an unprofitable investment in house paint rather than salable books.



Henry Peter and Matilda Kruse Krehbiel, ca. 1891 (taken in Halstead, Kansas)

After several more turnovers in new editors, (J. B. Epp, A. Warkentin) Krehbiel himself assumed the company management and the *Herold* editorship in 1923. J. B. Epp, father of radio preacher Theodore Epp, served three years as pastor of the Pretty Prairie Mennonite Church, after which he became *Der Herold* editor in 1922. His editorship lasted a little over a year. Later in 1928-29 he taught at Hesston Academy and again served Kansas and Oklahoma churches in the 1930’s. Abraham Warkentin’s editorial responsibility on *Der Herold* was ill-defined and of short duration. This was after his arrival in the United States from Germany in 1923. His duties included copy editing and proofreading.

In that same year (1923), a new and important era began in the life of the Herald Publishing Co. when the first issue of the *Mennonite Weekly Review* came off the press in September. It was a four-page, broad-sheet introductory edition, initially distributed as a supplement to the German *Herold*. Adolf Krehbiel, a nephew of H. P. Krehbiel and a recent Bethel College graduate, became the first editor. There was a fairly satisfactory growth in readership, but already in the first year Adolf Krehbiel felt himself circumscribed as to his scope of action. He complained that former college classmates were receiving “more than twice my salary,” and that he was “virtually contributing a considerable sum to the com-

pany in the form of wages not actually drawn." Actual termination as *Review* editor came on August 29, 1925. Less than two months later H. P. Krehbiel also assumed the editorship of the *Review*.

Meanwhile, three young men accepted employment with the company. Gerhard H. Willms, an enterprising Russian Mennonite refugee who had recently fled to America with his wife and other relatives, on October 1, 1923; Abe Epp, a public school teacher, on July 1, 1925; and Menno Schrag, a graduate of Hesston Academy, on August 25, 1925.

Of these three men Krehbiel wrote to the board of directors on October 8, 1925: "Mr. Epp is being trained as assistant manager . . . Mr. Willms is also being drawn into some phases of assistant manager work . . . If Mr. G. Willms would decide not to wish to enter into an arrangement for protracted stay with our establishment, then, that the General Manager (Krehbiel) be authorized to make arrangement with Mr. Menno Schrag to fill the place now occupied by Mr. G. Willms."

My first contact with Krehbiel took place in the early part of August, 1925, when I responded to a help-wanted advertisement in the German *Herold*. It was a typically hot August forenoon when I, my mother and one of my older brothers drove in my brother's Ford coupe to Newton from our Kingman County home. We stopped in front of Krehbiel's East Seventh Street office. The office had a large window and Krehbiel happened to be sitting at his roll-top desk.

My mother, who could be somewhat irreverent about important people, cryptically said (in the Swiss dialect), "*Dort hockt er.*" (There he sits.)

Krehbiel, who was quite pleased over my two Hesston Academy diplomas (high school and Bible) and my three-month training at Hutchinson Salt City Business College, said I could begin in two weeks, or sooner if I wanted. I would be working six days a week, seven a.m. to six p.m., with one hour off at noon. My pay would be \$8.00 a week. A friend said to me, "You can earn more money digging ditches."

Krehbiel was not a man to become intimate with his employees. But here and there occasions would arise where he would share with me his sentiments about trends in conference and

politics—which one could not in any way call ambivalent. Presidents Coolidge and Hoover were doing just fine but he did not like some of the men running the conference. He approved of the Old Mennonites' closing of Goshen College (1923) but saw danger in the college unloading its liberal professors on the General Conference. He supported historian John Horsch in his battle against biblical heresy within and without the church, had frequent correspondence with Horsch and published a number of his articles in the *Review*.

Leading fundamentalists like J. Gresham Machen and W. B. Riley were considered important roadblocks against the onslaughts of modernism.

I soon learned that Krehbiel's term on the college board of directors had not endeared him to Bethel College. It seems it was about that time that the controversy over such teachers as C. C. Regier, Samuel Burkhard, J. F. Balzer and E. R. Riesen came to a head, with Krehbiel a leading exponent of making a clean sweep of the "liberal" teachers. Even later, when I was already connected with the *Review*, an exasperated Bethel College alumni board published an appeal for a boycott of the *Review* because of Krehbiel's persistent criticisms of the school.

I had worked at the Herald Publishing Co. about sixteen months as Intertype operator when Krehbiel came to me reporting that Abe Epp, the *Review* assistant editor, would be leaving December 31 and that beginning January 1, 1927, I would be the *Review* assistant editor. Adding to the startling news, Krehbiel said that he and Mrs. Krehbiel would be making a one-year tour around the world, leaving in early 1927. I would be responsible for editing and getting out the paper each week and would on occasion also need to function as assistant manager. Willms would be the temporary manager.

And there would be yet another responsibility. I would need to be acting secretary of the recently organized Mennonite Settlers Aid Society. Never much of a team player, Krehbiel, together with four other Kansas ministers, had organized his own refugee resettlement program, the Mennonite Settlers Aid Society. He did not intend this to be a competitor of MCC. His main interest was helping stranded Russian refugee groups in Harbin,

China, and at out-of-the-way localities in Europe and the Far East. Some of the refugees were to be settled at Cuauhtemoc in Chihuahua province in Mexico, others on a large tract of land he had reserved at Newport, Washington, under a rather loose arrangement with the Great Northern Railroad. Refugees who came via Siberia and China settled at Cuauhtemoc along the Canadian Old Colony people and those who came from Europe settled in Washington.

As he would find prospective settlers on his world tour, Krehbiel explained, he would notify me, and I would then need to affix my signature to certificates authenticating settlement rights for such families on the Washington tract. Krehbiel familiarized me with the certificates, and I had the impression I was being vested with a quite prestigious office. In the course of the year I did issue a few certificates, but whether any ever served any useful purpose I don't know. It seemed to me an unnecessary formality.

The New Year's weekend was one of the saddest and troubled of my life. A timid 22-year-old farm boy, not blessed with a commanding personality or imposing physique like some others of my age, I had never edited anything, couldn't have known any less about dealing in public affairs, and really didn't care for the job.

I spent New Year's eve and New Year's day with my family at Pretty Prairie, but was too embarrassed to tell many about my new assignment, although I did confide in my mother or perhaps one or two of my older brothers. I felt sure that were I to tell any of the church people that I was going to be an editor they would have been as embarrassed as I.

One consolation was that I loved to write, had been class valedictorian at my grade school graduation, had won second prize in a national inter-Mennonite church history contest with an essay on Menno Simons, and was one of the two "orators" at the Hesston Academy graduation.

My first editorial year (1927) was adventurous. But as journalistic ink gradually began seeping into my veins, I even ventured some innovations—such as headlining news stories, one of which featured J. E. Hartzler, former president of Goshen and Bethel colleges and then president of Witmarsum

Theological Seminary, as main speaker at an up-coming convention. This, I later found out, Krehbiel didn't like, but I hadn't known that Hartzler's was not one of the approved names for the headline list. I did however feel that I had reader support and occasionally a church leader and now and then also a college professor would stop in to wish me well. This gave me much-needed encouragement and in later years such contacts developed into helpful and lasting friendships.

Krehbiel remembered us with articles and tour reports from Europe and the Far East, which generally were long in coming because of the slowness of land and ocean mail.

One day a somewhat bulky, sweet-smelling package arrived—from Switzerland. Staff and workers opened the package, and, what a surprise! Krehbiel had remembered us with several dozen bars of the finest Swiss chocolate. A short while later another package came, delectable and generous as the first. To our puzzlement, within a week or two the post office brought yet a third shipment—this time three or four packages in one bundle. There obviously was something here we didn't know! This time we touched not another cord or wrapping, but carefully stashed the bundle away in the fireproof vault.

Months later, back from the globe-circling tour, Krehbiel inquired about the packages. To the best of his memory he had shipped two more than were in the vault. Discreetly, we said nothing. We found out Krehbiel loved chocolate!

Upon Krehbiel's return in early 1928 I, too, felt I needed a change. The many responsibilities of the past 18 months as acting editor, assistant acting manager and duties in the production department had been hard on my health. I was weary and had lost weight. Also I wanted to finish college.

Krehbiel regretted to see me go but hoped I would return after graduation in three years (June 1931). Rather unexpectedly, he already contacted me in 1930, requesting that I help out during the summer of that year, which I did. (Mrs. Krehbiel had become ill while on the world tour and suffered much discomfort during a good part of the trip. Her condition worsened after the return home and on April 20, 1931 she passed away. Some four years later Krehbiel married Katie Friesen, one of

the long-time Herald Co. employees.)

I spent the three years (1928-31) attending summer school in Colorado and in the industrial West Chicago area. Here my skills as a Linotype operator earned me about three times the wages I had received in Newton—thus enabling me to also attend Wheaton College.

After my graduation in 1931, I resumed the *Review* assistant editorship, as I had agreed. As it turned out "assistant editor" meant almost full editorial and production responsibility but not full decision-making authority. Krehbiel was pleased with my return. Later (1933) upon my marriage to Gertrude Aeberhard from Pandora, Ohio, he treated us with a cake and ice cream reception at his home—a cordiality he had not shown to any other employees. But I soon noticed that not all was well at the Herald Publishing Co. The Great Depression had set in—and was deepening. In Krehbiel's view the defeat of President Hoover portended radical change and economic disaster.

The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and quick enactment of minimum wage laws and the National Recovery Act

(NRA) confirmed Krehbiel's worst fears. Determined man as he was, he devised ways to beat the system. Workers would receive the required minimum wage, but would also sign vouchers authorizing the company to withhold a certain percentage of their weekly check as a loan, settlement to be negotiated at a later date.

Although stating that they were complying at their own free will (to preserve their jobs), workers resented the arrangement. The crises deepened and other complications developed. One employee quit, taking a job at another publishing company in the city. Also in some manner the withholding arrangement became known to NRA authorities and the Herald Publishing Co. was cited in violation of the federal labor code. The voucher plan was promptly discontinued.

I felt the employee group was justified in its resentments, but was also deeply troubled by the worker-management polarizations that were beginning to affect company operations. Since my youth I had believed increasingly that where there were grievances



Henry Peter and Katie A. Friesen Krehbiel

one shouldn't tell others but go directly to the person or persons involved. Although I carried no management responsibility, I decided on my own to have a private meeting with Krehbiel.

As I recall, it was a warm forenoon in May 1935 when, with fear and trembling, I walked the three blocks to the Krehbiel house—at 330 West 6th Street. Krehbiel met me at the door and cordially invited me to come with him to his upstairs office.

As forthrightly as I knew, I told him I felt that his authoritarian, almost inconsiderate way of dealing with the employees was not only unwise but wrong. Krehbiel, always a controlled man, responded calmly and quietly but underneath I could detect resentment and cold anger. After all—only an employee, a young man just out of college with nothing to match his seniority, experience and public standing—who was I to tell him what to do?

As we continued talking, there appeared a gradual lessening of tension and a growing appreciation (perhaps even admiration) for my openness, candor and concern. In fact, a side of his character began to show that I had never seen before. I sensed a spiritual depth, and a gradual heart-to-heart warmth that was deeply moving and comforting.

He suggested that we kneel together in prayer. Although I don't remember his words, he prayed for understanding and unity between us two and an equitable solution to company problems. In my prayer, I endeavored to reciprocate his sentiments for greater love and divine guidance. I left the home confident that things would turn for the better.

But the rest of the workers and staff did not share my optimism. In early August 1935 several key employees walked out and stayed away for about a month or more. Krehbiel appreciated my decision not to join the "obstructionists" (as he called them) and promptly appointed me acting manager.

The summer of 1935 was extremely hot, and, aside from regularly getting out the *Memnonite Weekly Review*, there was plenty of commercial printing to do. It was more than the reduced work force could handle.

I decided to write a letter to the board of directors, stating that a crisis had developed which required immediate attention. Krehbiel being president of the board, I addressed the letter to him in

person. But finding the letter lying in his desk drawer sometime later with still no meeting called, I mailed a duplicate copy to the vice-president, P. H. Unruh, elder of the large Alexanderwohl church of Goessel, Ks. Less than thirty-six hours later, Unruh, a stocky man of impressive personality, walked in and in a matter of days the nine-member board met in full session.

After a long and often tense series of meetings, Krehbiel resigned both as company manager and *Herold* and *Review* editor. Willnis replaced Krehbiel as manager and *Herold* editor, I was appointed *Review* editor and assistant manager.

The abrupt change in editorial and management structure proved only a partial solution to the problem. Through the years Krehbiel had accumulated a preponderance of membership votes, which gave him majority control at the company's annual corporation meetings. Krehbiel insisted that the votes had been legitimately acquired in lieu of unremunerated services rendered. The new manager and a majority of directors disagreed and eventually a large portion of Krehbiel's votes were cancelled. Deeply grieved, Krehbiel repeatedly addressed himself to the board and pleaded for restoration of the cancelled votes.

With the dispute dragging on and no solution in sight, Krehbiel—joined by his daughter Elva Leisy, who also held a considerable number of votes, transferred to her earlier under provisions of the company bylaws—finally filed suit in Harvey county district court, saying he was doing this most reluctantly and with a burdened heart. He reminded the board that he had persistently recommended biblical means to achieve a settlement, but to no avail.

The litigation, however, never came to trial. What Krehbiel, board and employees apparently were unable to accomplish, two opposing lawyers did. A compromise was worked out under which Krehbiel gave up nearly all of his votes, with his daughter being allowed to keep most of hers.

Except for a few "winding up" contacts, relations between Krehbiel and Herald Publishing Co. personnel had come to an end. In 1936 the company purchased its own building on West Sixth Street (the former Welsh building 129-133 West Sixth) and relocated its printing equipment and book store from

722 North Main to the new premises in May 1938.

Suspected of pro-German sentiments after outbreak of World War II, the German *Herold* was barred from Canada (where most of its readers were at that time) and subsequently ceased publication with the end of 1941. Several years later (1946) G. H. Willms resigned the Herald Publishing Co. managership to establish his own printing enterprise.

Responsibility for continuance of the *Memnonite Weekly Review* and Herald Publishing Co. was transferred by the board of directors into my hands, a work which I then carried on for another 28 years, until my retirement in 1974. The board of directors unanimously voted in 1946 to offer a cash payment to Elva Leisy for her company votes, an offer she gladly accepted. The board had achieved its objective of "one member, one vote."

Despite severance of occupational relations, casual contacts between H. P. Krehbiel and myself continued—which I appreciated. Without doubt he was often disappointed in me, yet our friendship appeared to grow closer again in the final year of his life. I shall always remember the last conversation with him, in which he expressed the hope that I would "preserve the Herald Publishing Co." This conversation took place in his only visit to our new Sixth Street office. Heartening also was that my cordial relations with Elva Leisy never faltered and continued as long as she lived. Her visits to my office whenever she came to Newton were quite regular and cordial.

H. P. Krehbiel died October 5, 1940, at age 78, a saddened and disappointed man. His daughter passed away at her home in Dallas, Texas on Christmas Day, 1982.

These remembrances would be incomplete without some concluding comments regarding H. P. Krehbiel's major convictions, personal faith, strengths and weaknesses as I observed them.

Krehbiel had an incisive and highly analytical mind. He was a master at marshalling arguments but often also was too inflexible to see the other person's point of view. His spearheading of an effort in 1932 to have the Western District Conference withdraw the \$100,000 it had originally given to Bethel College, based on grounds that

the college no longer deserved this support, was obviously ill-conceived. Having been personally present at the special conference session to deal with this question, I still have vivid memories of the stormy proceedings. Krehbiel had shared with me the thought that an academy and Bible school could probably be established in an uptown garage space he had available. Actually, not being a school man, he could not have operated such a school even if it had materialized.

Regarding national affairs, Krehbiel was an immovable conservative. His political favorites were William Jennings Bryan and Herbert Hoover. For the deepening 1930-36 depression—which he called a “misnomer”—he blamed “high wages and misdirected expenditures,” echoing an article in the *Bulletin of the N. Y. National City Bank*.

On the credit side of the ledger it must be said that his almost penurious business practices were probably a major factor in the Herald Publishing Company's survival of the Great Depression—something which hundreds of other businesses in these parts of the state did not do. Meager as company wages were, they amounted to more than relief allotments and all workers each Saturday got their pay.

Nothing could possibly have been closer to Krehbiel's heart than the publishing enterprise. Yet, unfortunately, he was not a journalist. The majority of his editorials were reprints from exchange publications, prefaced with short introductory remarks of his own. As I remember, he wrote not a single original news story; going on a “news beat” was not in his system. The “generalist” approach necessary for an alert and creative journalism was foreign to him. Although he laid the foundation, it remained for others to develop the super-structure he had in mind but wasn't able to bring into being.

Religiously, Krehbiel had a soundly biblical and perceptive faith. In the raging fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s and 30s, he sided with the fundamentalists. Yet, had the fundamentalists really understood him, they would have disowned him. While strongly supporting biblical orthodoxy, Krehbiel was also an out-and-out social activist. He deserved much credit for his part in bringing about the large convocation of Historic Peace Church

representatives in Newton City Auditorium in 1935. I attended this meeting and prepared a brief report for the *Review*. Krehbiel loomed as prime mover at the opening exercises of the conference. But it wasn't long before the Old Mennonite, Quaker and Brethren delegations emerged as the real leaders of the session. To a proposal by a Quaker spokesman for a more radical anti-military stance (such as non-payment of war taxes) Krehbiel responded “we would then have to go out of this world.”

Krehbiel's strong stand for biblical nonresistance was not hidden under a bushel. During and after World War I, he was publicly marked with “slacker” smirchings, including yellow paint on his store. As late as 1925, a young local patriot still reminded me that I wasn't going to win any popularity marks by joining the “unpatriotic Herald.” Krehbiel's open contacts with Camp Funston and Ft. Leavenworth COs during the war had brought him outright derision from militant townsmen.

But Krehbiel was not to be daunted. He was an outspoken supporter of disarmament and urged petitions against a congressional bill authorizing the building of fifteen modern cruisers for the U. S. Navy. While not really sharing the socialists' optimism for a warless world, he did believe that Christian activism could make positive impact for international arms reduction—a cause which he developed as a major theme in his later book, *War, Peace, Amity*. Among his favorite peace activists were Kirby Page, Jane Addams, Sherwood Eddy and A. J. Muste.

Despite the ironic paradox that Krehbiel could not make his world peace vision effective in work day relations with his co-workers at home, he did leave a positive imprint on the life of the broader church and conference constituency.

I'm grateful for having had H. P. Krehbiel as employer, associate and friend. His place in the Mennonite arena was unique.



Herald Publishing Company offices, 105 East 7th St.

Anna Brons and Ludwig Keller

by Mary Sprunger

Anna Brons was a nineteenth-century German Mennonite, and the first historian to chronicle the development of her people from their Swiss Reformation roots to their nineteenth-century status in Europe, Russia and America. Her influence came not only through her pen, but through her active involvement in the church and community, her keen intellect that merged with a deep faith in an ethical Christianity, and her many personal contacts. Throughout the later years of her life, Brons carried on a rich correspondence with the Reformation historian Ludwig Keller.¹ Although himself not a Mennonite, Keller was personally and historically dedicated to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, in whose descendants he found exciting potential for reviving Anabaptist principles. To this end, Brons and Keller sought to unite German Mennonites in the true Anabaptist spirit that would bring renewal to their own congregations and maybe to society as a whole. Through letters, these two historians exchanged ideas from their historical and theological interests and shared hope and discouragement in their common cause to bring about an Anabaptist renaissance.

Anna Brons: Life, Thought and Work

Anna Brons, nee Cremer ten Doornkaat, spent her life in East Friesland, the area in Germany with the strongest family, spiritual and intellectual ties to the neighboring Dutch Mennonites. Because her mother died shortly after Anna's birth in 1810, and because the business life of her father, Jan ten Doornkaat, made it hard for him to

care for a young baby, Anna grew up in Norden in the home of her mother's brother, Sikke Doeden Cremer. Despite the wealth of the Cremer family, they did not live lavishly, and here Anna learned the virtues of simplicity and moderation. Her foster parents laid the foundation for her life of faith, love and learning. They taught her obedience, duty, industriousness and integrity, but more importantly, they taught her to be a faithful Christian and an eager scholar.²

The Mennonite youth of Norden attended the Lutheran public schools and participated in their catechism. Here Anna learned to recite the Apostles' Creed, whose images of a distant, frightful God deeply disturbed the little girl. But she also learned Psalms which comforted her and stilled the effects of the fearful Apostles' Creed. When she began religious instruction under her pastor, they never used the Creed but studied Scripture and beliefs that helped her to defend her Mennonite faith against the jests of Lutheran and Reformed children. On her own initiative she struggled through van Braght's *Martyrs' Mirror*. The stories and pictures deeply impressed her, for she felt something in common with the Anabaptist martyrs in the verbal persecution she often endured. This was Brons' only early exposure to Mennonite or Anabaptist history.³

The Cremers gave Anna a good education, and after she finished high school, she continued studies with a tutor and through individual reading. Although there was no bookstore in all of East Friesland, Anna's uncle nonetheless acquired books and encouraged her to read

them. She became acquainted with world history, ethnology, geography, psychology and old and new literature. She wrote later, "I give thanks that I received good seeds from these books." After her marriage to Isaac Brons (1802-1886) in 1830, Anna had even more opportunity to learn, as the couple often read and studied together.⁴

Isaac was a prosperous businessman from Emden, and it was here, in the largest city of East Friesland, that the new couple made their home. Isaac was active in both the life of the Mennonite church and in his secular environment. Together Anna and Isaac raised nine children and supported each other until Isaac's death in 1886. Anna continued to live another fifteen years, finding joy in her historical work and in her children and thirty-five grandchildren. She remained interested in all Mennonite organizations and writings until her death at the age of ninety-two in 1902.⁵ Isaac's business is still in the hands of the Brons family, who continue to live in Emden.⁶

Anna Brons was a Mennonite, a *Taufgesinntin*, and this loyalty to God and the *Gemeinde* dictated all that she did. Both Anna and Isaac had a deep faith expressed in an ethical Christianity: Christ was the prophet and teacher of eternal truth and those who came to know him would be filled with a sense of duty and responsibility. Anna had no understanding for a theology that emphasized only the redemptive power of the Resurrection. On the title page of her most important work, *Ursprung, Entwicklung [sic] und Schicksale der Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten*, she quoted

the Anabaptist mystic Hans Denck: "No one has the power to truly know Christ, unless he follows [*nachfolgen*] him in life."⁷ Discipleship was the essence of her faith.

The Brons family was very active in church life. For over forty years, Isaac was a deacon of the Emden congregation and was always ready to help in financial crises. When trade in the port city of Emden decreased in the winter months, Isaac and Anna were concerned about the unemployed. One winter they provided a large pot of bean soup daily for the hungry, and Anna made many wool coats for women and children. Isaac was instrumental in the establishment and maintenance of a factory for the unemployed, a project designed by a Dutch pastor. Anna promoted Mennonitism in any way that she could and had a special interest in the Mennonite school at Weierhof, which she hoped would one day become a seminary. She donated time and money to most Mennonite organizations, and she herself helped to breathe life into the conference of German Mennonites, the *Vereinigung der Mennoniten-Gemeinden im Deutschen Reich*.⁸

Anna and her husband strengthened their faith through the study of philosophy and literature. Keller wrote that "hand in hand with an active participation [in community and political affairs] went an intense interest in literature, history, philosophy and, above all, religious questions for the couple. . . ."⁹ Their Christianity was a harmonious blend of biblical piety, love of humanity and the idealism of Schiller and other German poets. Together they studied Plato, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel.¹⁰ Anna was convinced that "the truth lies only in the depths" and thus found higher criticism and church history helpful in interpreting the Bible.¹¹ She never questioned the compatibility of faith and reason and once wrote, "Reason tells me I must believe." In her eyes, faith motivated efforts to understand the historical and metaphysical connection of the God-created world. Yet she was no Rationalist and took great offense at those who accused the Hanovarian and Dutch Mennonites of falling prey to Ra-



tionalism.¹²

Anna recalled the role of her church in furthering her biblical study. She wrote, "With inner thanks I remember the welcome spiritual nourishment that came from the Sunday sermons, a powerful support to me in my life's journey." They reflected research and knowledge and a foundation in free biblical meaning rather than in rigid doctrine. Anna asserted that here ". . . knowledge and faith reciprocally encouraged one another!"¹³ Because of her approach to the sermon as an intellectual as well as a spiritual experience, Anna objected to lay ministers. She believed that their understanding could not be as deep as those with seminary training.¹⁴

Just as Anna reconciled faith and reason without hesitation, so also she found no conflict between love of country and love of Christ. Caught up in the political fervor of the century, she was a confirmed patriot and nationalist: she equated being a good Christian with being a good German. The right interpretation of Christianity would result in the right political views. In discussing the Mennonite nonresistance in *Ursprung*, her major argument for rejecting complete paci-

fism rested more on the "fatherland" than on the Bible.¹⁵ Thus Isaac served on a commission to build up a Prussian navy—strengthening Prussia strengthened chances for German unification—and two of the Brons sons joined the army in 1870 in the enthusiastic effort to demoralize France.¹⁶

While her husband participated in the abortive unification attempt at Frankfurt in 1848, Anna wrote him letters that showed her intolerance for conservative reactionaries and the leftist democrats who were trying to stop the establishment of a common German state. She seemed to believe that God was blessing unification, as well as a constitutional monarchy, the only kind of government suitable for Christian nations. Through "strength and spiritual maturity," Germany would have to prove herself ready for the new rights and freedom that a constitution would provide. That Anna Brons, a nineteenth-century Mennonite who generally practiced understanding, tolerance and love, would be so uncompromising and outspoken in the political realm was not surprising, given the nationwide enthusiasm for German unification. Anna wrote that their children gaily sang "Brothers, take up

the sword to make Germany free!" These words and general attitude were contrary to traditional Anabaptist principles, but the East Friesian Mennonites no longer saw the need for remaining separate from the world.¹⁷ They had fought for their political rights and were not going to be the "Stille im Land."

Besides her political interests, Anna was involved in other projects and organizations that benefited her city and country. She helped to found a girls school and a kindergarten in Emden and later organized a women's society to aid soldiers and civilians of Schleswig-Holstein suffering from the Prussian-Danish war. When she was the president of the Women's Union for Wounded German Combatants, Anna was careful to include the enemy Hanovarian soldiers as well as the Prussian ones in the society's outreach. Where help was needed, Anna Brons helped.¹⁸

At the age of seventy-four, Anna Brons published her influential first book, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale der Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten* (1884). The Mennonites, previously weak in historical consciousness, had just begun to recognize their rich past as important to Reformation history. Christine Hege, in a concise history of the Mennonites, emphasized East Friesland as a center of historical research. It was the East Friesians who through archival research did ground-breaking work in sparking the interest of German Mennonites for their own past. Hege wrote that Brons ". . . attests in her book to a warm interest that she did not see as idle, but herself put pen to paper to help her own community properly value its past."¹⁹ What resulted was the first German history to draw together the whole development process of the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement.

Ursprung is just what the title indicates: a history of the Mennonites from their Anabaptist roots to the late nineteenth century. Her description of Waldensian and Anabaptist connections is the clearest indication of dependence on Ludwig Keller's interpretation of the radical Reformation. She, like Keller, placed the Anabaptists in a chain of apostolic succession. Brons must have

felt some spiritual link to the Waldenses, for she took an active financial and scholarly interest in this group.²⁰

Brons did not deal with specific Anabaptist principles in a large way. She stressed the need to break away from the state and institutional power and to form a brotherhood whose authority was grounded in the Gospel. The Anabaptists cultivated the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount and the ethical aspects of the apostolic letters in all classes of society. The rejection of infant baptism and a new understanding of the symbolic Lord's Supper were the principles that held the group together. Brons treated nonresistance, like the ban, as an important but secondary belief.²¹

Brons sent several preliminary copies of the book to friends and colleagues for advice before its actual publication. These early reactions to her book were generally favorable. Keller apparently liked what he read and urged her to go ahead with its completion. Dutch historian Jacob G. de Hoop Scheffer praised *Ursprung* both for its presentation and content. He liked the way Brons treated the inner, religious life of the Mennonites and told her, "You have rendered a truly outstanding service for our church. . . ." Brons' joy over such a compliment was dampened upon learning that De Hoop Scheffer had informed his son that the book contained historical inaccuracies.²²

Brons was fully aware that her historical work was not scientific, but this had never been her goal. She was, in fact, averse to scholarship for the sake of scholarship—pure intellectual erudition.²³ She wrote from a passionate interest and gave meaning to events by interpreting them in light of her own time.²⁴ In the preface to *Ursprung*, she asked readers not to be too critical of her book but to judge it with reverence. They should find joy in knowing that the work kept her busy and gave meaning to the later years of her life. Should it prove to be interesting, then perhaps it might reach wider circles, but it is nonetheless the work of an amateur historian.²⁵

Yet Brons' history of the Mennonites displayed historical merit.

Other historians praised her contribution to Mennonite history in reviews and biographical sketches. Professor of theology F. J. Schmidt of Berlin, in the *Monatsheften für Volkserziehung* still found merit in her history of the Mennonites over thirty years after its publication. He was impressed with the way she synthesized a living, evangelical piety with a liberal, intellectual foundation and recommended her book to Mennonites and evangelical brotherhoods. "Here has succeeded where no one else has been able to succeed: the reconciliation of faith and knowledge, between religion and science."²⁶ Samuel Cramer, once the pastor of the Emden church and then associated with the University of Amsterdam and the Mennonite Seminary, emphasized the work and dedication that had gone into Brons' readable history: "It was the fruit of twenty years of industrious reading and is written not only from much knowledge and judgement, but also from her warm, devout heart."²⁷ Keller wrote that "if one considers that Anna Brons was already seventy-three years old and take into account the difficulties that come from a task with such varied details, then one must regard with highest esteem that achievement which the author herself described as 'the



Ludwig Keller

fruit of a grandmother's spare time.'"²⁸

While Brons was not at the center of academic influence and may not have been consciously aware of all the trends in the historical method, she was certainly influenced by nineteenth-century intellectual currents. Brons was a "whig" historian with a clear cause in mind, and it is tempting to compare the Prussian historians who wrote with German unification guiding their pens, to Brons and the goal of Mennonite unification. She wrote that through Keller's historical endeavors the Mennonites had become more widely known and appreciated and had gained a new sense of belonging just ". . . like every German abroad after Germany showed itself in former might and honored itself and was honored by others."²⁹

She sought to set right the misunderstood and misrepresented Anabaptist movement and Mennonite church. The Hanovarian denial of her husband's right to elected office in 1838, and a similar experience of his brother in 1857 excited her interest in Mennonite history as she compared this discrimination to sixteenth-century persecution. Brons recognized a significance for her time in the religious and social movements of the Reformation and a benefit in trying to understand their characters.³⁰

Her Mennonite contemporaries were not as aware of their origins as they should have been to fully appreciate the sacrifices of their Anabaptist forefathers. Just as it is disgraceful for a people to lose sight of their national history, so also is it for a denomination: "Its members lose from sight the foundation upon which they stand, and the piety and the heart-felt adherence to it." Mennonites must recognize that although their numbers be few, their effectiveness ". . . as men, Christians and citizens is indeed relatively significant;" they cannot let all that has thus far been gained go to waste, but must stand up "as true children of the Reformation" with just as legitimate a tradition as the Lutherans and Reformed.³¹

Ludwig Keller

Ludwig Keller (1849-1915) came

to the foreground of Reformation history in the 1880's, a history badly in need of revision. In his first book, *Geschichte der Wiedertäufer und ihres Reich zu Münster* (1880), Keller treated the unfortunate Anabaptist fiasco in Münster as an exception in the radical Reformation movement. In this and other books, he drew attention to those beliefs which he interpreted as the essence of Anabaptism: independent voluntary brotherhoods of believers rather than denominational formalism, adult baptism, a simple belief system that emphasized free thought rather than rigid doctrine, biblical faith and discipleship, Christian charity and love, and Christian discipline through the ban.

He attempted to establish Anabaptists in a line of succession from the early apostolic church, through groups he called "altevangalische Gemeinden," or old evangelical brotherhoods. Based only on circumstantial evidence, this romantic but unfounded theory influenced Mennonites, who found security and identity in an apostolic connection. Although later historians discredited Keller's theory, his sympathetic approach to the "fanatics" and "rabble-rousers" of the radical Reformation elevated the Anabaptists to an historical status they had never before enjoyed.³²

Brons and Keller: Historians for Renewal

Brons carried on a lively written exchange with an impressive list of pastors and scholars. Letters were of great importance in establishing contacts, spreading ideas and working on projects, especially for Brons, who did not travel. One of her faithful correspondents was Samuel Cramer, with whom Anna and Isaac had established contact during his short time as pastor of the Emden congregation. He was amazed by both the quality and quantity of correspondence Brons was able to put out and admitted, "I do not know whether I must wonder more at the ease with which she brought her thoughts to paper or at the great number of people with whom she was in correspondence."³³ She wrote and received letters about matters of faith and the Mennonite church from Russia to Canada, but she also

exchanged ideas with such historians as J. G. de Hoop Scheffer, Wilhelm G. Goeters and, of course, Ludwig Keller.³⁴ Her letters had impact, according to Cramer, for "when she wrote, she indeed had serious things to say, and as she wrote, she lived completely with the person to whom she was writing."³⁵

Ludwig Keller was without question Brons' most significant correspondent. She wrote him sixty-six letters from 1883 to 1902, the year of her death, and Keller responded with over thirty.³⁶ Keller wrote that one of his works had encouraged her ". . . to seek out a personal connection with me that continued in the same manner for twenty years until her death and found expression in an active correspondence."³⁷ As scholars, they helped each other by exchanging sources, books and article, by distributing publications and by discussing the work of others. Brons' letters reveal a broad knowledge of Reformation and apostolic church history and a familiarity with contemporary Anabaptist articles, which she read with a critical eye.

Behind this scholarly interaction was a deeper tie: a mission for the recovery of the spiritual vitality and discipleship of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Keller's vision was for a wide-spread Christian humanism with its roots in the old evangelical brotherhoods; Brons channeled her energies more specifically into a rejuvenated Mennonitism. Her end was Keller's means to a broader spiritual reconstruction that would eventually prevail over the orthodoxy and dogmatism of the Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed churches. Through a long and fascinating correspondence, the two historians supported each other in their work toward the realization of their visions.

Brons first contacted Keller in 1883, although she had long wanted to begin correspondence. Her fear of wasting his precious time, however, had held her back. An almost mystical experience on reading Keller's biography of Hans Denck, *Ein Apostel der Wiedertäufer*, encouraged her to finally introduce herself to the Anabaptist scholar:

It seemed to me as though those killed for their faith over three hundred years ago were living again through God's inspiration; as though they looked around, as though they wanted to ask: "Are we recognized among the living generations? Will they admit and atone the crime that was committed to us by their ancestors?" And as I sat there, my breast swelled with joy and gratitude that nothing which comes from above, like the rain, returns again without having fructified the earth even if centuries pass before the fruit is evident. . . .³⁸

Brons received further encouragement from Cramer, who wrote that in an enriching visit with Keller, he had learned that the Anabaptist scholar wanted to participate more in Mennonite circles. To learn that Keller was personally interested in her beloved church was the incentive Brons needed to introduce herself to him.³⁹

Keller and Brons discovered that they had similar goals, if on different scales: through education they wanted to achieve a renewal of Anabaptist principles, Brons in the Mennonite church, Keller in society as a whole. A good historical knowledge was essential for anyone who wanted to spread the inner spirit.⁴⁰ Brons and Keller were very interested in an article by J. Ellenberger in the *Gemeindeblatt*. He suggested that Mennonite membership and spirituality were slipping because people were not enough aware of their own history.⁴¹ Through a knowledge of their Anabaptist roots, Mennonites could regain an understanding of the true meaning of the believer's church, of members that deeply commit themselves to follow Christ.⁴² Brons was, in fact, optimistic: "I believe that the time has just now come."⁴³ An incident that points to a concrete attempt at changing society through history occurred when her grandson's school listed him as a "dissident," next to Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed. Brons was upset and sent the school a notice of her displeasure and a copy of a speech Keller had presented on old evangelical history. After reading Keller's speech, the school, who at first turned down her suggestion for including Mennonites as a recognized church, advised Brons

that Mennonites would no longer be considered dissident.⁴⁴

This vision of reconstruction through historical awareness could only be successful with the support of a group that would encourage publication and distribution of old evangelical literature. Although Brons found support for her work amongst the Mennonites, Keller sensed indifference and ingratitude. Recognition and support were important to him, and when he found that his hard work and dedication were falling unappreciated on the Mennonite community, disillusionment set in. For fifteen years he endured literary attacks and abuses and the hostility of his colleagues. Many believed that the old evangelical "sects" paid him for his writing or that Keller himself had joined the Mennonites. Although he had some friends in Münster, there was a certain group that called him "*Wiedertäufer-Apostel*," smashed his windows, and "attempted still worse persecution."⁴⁵ Keller attributed much of this antagonism to the Lutheran trend toward orthodoxy, and he knew that he was not the only scholar to suffer severe criticism. He wrote Brons in 1886, "I have quietly endured all the falsehood and defamation that one person possibly could." It had been very depressing and equally hard to watch others tolerate the same treatment or worse.⁴⁶ The lack of coöperation, where Keller perceived there should be joint efforts, magnified the difficulty of his work. He pointed especially to the need for spiritual coöperation, of which he found almost no evidence.⁴⁷

It embarrassed Keller to have to complain in this way, but it concerned the Mennonites as well as himself. In one particularly depressing letter, Keller shared with Brons his frustration with the apparent indifference of the Mennonite community. He attributed Mennonite criticism and rejection to be the will of God, but it was especially painful. To Brons he wrote: "No defamation, no injury and no attacks from Ultramontane or Lutherans has so deeply hurt and offended me as the mean insults that the Mennonites, of all people, direct against me."⁴⁸ After the publication of his

next book, Brons would be able to see that scholars from all theological factions reviewed Reformation histories except the Mennonites. The Italian Waldenses, American Baptists and English Presbyterians had all defended him against Lutheran attacks—" . . . only the Mennonites (i.e. the scholarly representatives) have not said one word for me. That has hurt me very much."⁴⁹ If not for an intangible will that drove him on, he would quit instantaneously: "I would give up my mission into other hands at any instant (his I can say sincerely) and have seriously contemplated whether it would not be better for me to cease." He hoped that others might follow up his history with better work.⁵⁰

Yet Keller informed Brons that no one would be willing to take the part of the Anabaptists without a guarantee of support. His experiences in the academic world he described as "forbidding to everyone," and he could not recommend anyone to follow in his footsteps. "No one dares to stand up for the '*Wiedertäufer*' if he does not have assurance that devoted and energetic men stand behind him."⁵¹ With the help of other spokesmen, including some Mennonites, Keller planned in 1887 to assess the progress of his movement amongst the Mennonites. Hopefully he would be able to get a feel for his own situation and how he should advise other scholars. He was willing to admit defeat should he learn that he could not sway Mennonite scholars to support historic investigation and the publication of historic documents, or to see their contributions and sacrifices as necessary for their church. It was unfair for the Mennonites to expect only individuals to make sacrifices for their cause, and Keller's self-esteem would force him to " . . . openly admit that he had been deceived by those who seemed the most interested."⁵²

One of the keys to Keller's vision was Mennonite involvement in the publication of historical literature relating to the old evangelical brotherhoods, an interest that personally concerned Keller's work and financial situation. It was becoming increasingly difficult to publish controversial "sectarian" literature, for

it involved risks for both the author and the publisher. To find willing publishers with good reputations was next to impossible because they were, after all, businessmen who needed to protect their financial interests. Keller reminded Brons that his biography on Hans Denck had been a financial failure and that his dream to publish a volume of Denck's writings would probably never be realized. He feared that his own publishers would be unwilling to take on more of his work, and he already had been forced to subsidize some of his own publications.⁵³

Keller brought all this to Brons' attention, not as a direct request for personal help, but to make Mennonites aware of this important issue. The frustrations and failures of his work—the efforts of an evangelical historian and publisher—would surely discourage all other evangelicals from similar attempts.⁵⁴ "Without a strong subsidy (an academic one for the author and a financial one for the publisher) the opponents [the orthodox state churches] will soon triumph."⁵⁵ As a solution, Keller proposed a historical society that would promote Reformation history. Other Protestants had indicated interest in such an organization, and although he personally could not sacrifice his independence to a society, he would like to encourage more youthful scholars through this endeavor.⁵⁶

In 1885, Brons hoped that Keller would not take offense if she offered him advice like a son. Part of her encouragement was economic. She was a practical woman and questioned his financial status: "If you do this [make a sacrifice] from your abundance, then it is generous; but if that is not the case, excuse me, would that be fair to your wife and children?" She realized that the postage and stationary necessary for his work alone was much extra expense. She offered him some money with the words, "If I give to your disposal 100 M. for this purpose, would you resent me and find me indelicate?"⁵⁷ Keller declined this generous offer but accepted her help in a publishing fund. In 1886, part of this went to buy up seventy-two copies of one of Keller's works and

distribute them to Mennonites and other interested persons. Keller was indebted to Brons and sought her approval for the use of this fund by sending a list of those receiving the book.⁵⁸

More important than this financial concern, Brons responded to Keller's moods of defeat with reassurance and encouragement. In 1885, when Keller asked her if his work had actually had any effect in the Mennonite community, she was amazed that he could have such doubts:

Dear Doctor, how could you doubt your effectiveness? Now that the community is successfully elevating and asserting itself, it is certainly due, to a large extent, to your work; future generations will understand your worth in its entirety, for that is always how it goes.

Given time, God-given ideas will always take on bigger dimensions, even if at first from only a few deeply-moved people. Brons compared Keller's experience to strong opposition that she underwent when founding a kindergarten in Emden. She and others managed to maintain it through much effort and sacrifice, and after a time it became indispensable to the city of Emden.⁵⁹

Twelve years later, Brons was once again reassuring Keller of his significance and impact. She was indeed unhappy that Keller was so rarely recognized for his unflagging and profound study of Reformation history, and that he was still plagued by excessive and unkind criticism. She was impressed with his resolute and irrefutable defense against a specific attack and hoped that it would have an impact. Society and academia always criticized those with radically different ideas, but time eventually recognized them. She cited examples of Catholic and Protestant theologians and suggested that Keller be patient and await the time when his dedication and hard work would be ". . . recognized everywhere, as has indeed already occurred in many locations."⁶⁰

Keller realized that he directed his complaints to the wrong person, for Brons had always been supportive. While Keller thought that the Mennonites had rejected his *Comenius-Gesellschaft* (a society

that promoted old evangelical principles, the improvement of public education, historical research, and peace), he knew that Brons had always been supportive. She often made special mention of his success with the society, of which she agreed to become a member only if she would be listed as the oldest member of the Emden Mennonite congregation.⁶¹ Brons never rejected her colleague and friend, and Keller found her support to be a welcome addition to the strength sought in the example of his hero, Hans Denck, and through prayer.⁶² He once wrote in gratitude, "Yes, if all respected Mennonites had shared with me so much sincere cooperation and energetic help as you have, it would have spared me many inner and outer struggles (only a few have any idea of the severity and consequence of these)."⁶³

The letter-writing between Brons and Keller developed quickly from the intellectual level of two historians with common interests to a personal, friendly relationship. They shared family problems, sickness, grief, and occasional joy (a rarity for Keller) through their letters and expressed concern for each other. Although Keller tried several times to visit his most faithful Mennonite correspondent, it seems that Brons and Keller never met. Brons wrote her last letter at the age of ninety, about one year before her death. Even at this age, she was keeping track of Mennonite historical work and criticizing an article in the *Mennonitische Blätter*—in fact, she planned to write the editor and express her opposition. She had been sick for several weeks and ended the letter on a note of resignation: "My health is indeed somewhat better, but because of my age I am weak and have no energy; my days will soon be over, which I await with peace and faith in God's love and mercy."⁶⁴ With his personal link to the Mennonites now gone, Keller withdrew more and more from German Mennonitism to pursue other interests.

Brons: Woman and Historian

Although willing to assert herself in the male-dominated academic Mennonite world, Brons had tradi-

tional views about her role as a woman. In a short letter to her granddaughter, soon to be married, Brons revealed her loyalty to marriage and to the home. After blessing her granddaughter's approaching wedding, "the most important day of your life," she shared the happiness and peace that she had experienced at a recent family Christmas celebration. She hoped that her granddaughter might one day too be so happy and satisfied in her old age. A wife should give her full attention to the home, for which she alone was responsible. "Self-denial, complete devotion, serving love and common sense are the chief means with which she can begin, carry through and finish her duty." A wife must make the home a place where the husband can "collect his thoughts, strengthen himself and relax in the bosom of his family," so that he can "devote himself completely and fully to the responsibilities of his career, which are often very difficult." God will bless the marriage in which the man and wife are in complete accord.⁶⁵ Brons was a Mennonite, a wife and mother, and then an historian. Not until her household and family duties began to diminish did Brons allow herself time to pursue wholeheartedly her historical interests. Descendants remember her as a remarkable, warmhearted woman and marvel at all she was able to accomplish.⁶⁶

Although it is unusual that a woman over seventy years of age wrote the first comprehensive history of the Mennonites, Brons remained humble. The book has generally been praised as a significant contribution to nineteenth-century Mennonitism, but Brons was dubious about *Ursprung's* merit and success. Sophie Pataky, the editor of the *Lexicon deutscher Frauen der Feder*, had to contact Brons three times before she finally agreed to send in biographical information and the titles of her writings. She finally succumbed to the urges of her publisher, who assured her that it would be a worthwhile publication and good publicity for her book. What Brons actually had in mind was the good it might bring the Mennonites: "I am doing it also because I believe that it would be good

if the Mennonite religious community, so little known and indeed misjudged, appear in public."⁶⁷ Either due to an editorial decision or Brons' own modesty, the entry in this reference work defined her almost solely in terms of her husband's political activities; no mention is made of her extensive church and community involvement.⁶⁸ Pataky, after receiving the information and books, wrote in a letter that Brons was ". . . the only lady who writes with such expert knowledge and who possesses the experience and information that such a work requires."⁶⁹

Brons made no point of hiding the fact that she was a woman. Although she signed her name "A. Brons," most of her works explained that the author was a woman. On the title page of *Ursprung* are the words "*von Frauenhand*," and only after the preface does her name appear. Neither Brons nor Keller saw her womanhood as a handicap; if anything, it gave her work special meaning. In a letter to Keller about some of her work in *Ursprung* Brons wrote that "maybe a female eye quite often sees and feels some different things than that of a man."⁷⁰ Keller, in a tribute to Brons after her death in 1902, hoped that those who denounced *Ursprung* for its unscientific approach would at least recognize another kind of merit:

. . . This kind of treatment can offer them helpful pointers and worthwhile stimulation, to say nothing of the fact that this "woman's hand" struck the right chord in many "women's hearts." With that, Anna Brons perfectly achieved the mission she had set out for herself, which in no way aimed at a scholarly end.⁷¹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Amalie Keller, "Ludwig Keller—Scholar with a Mission," *Mennonite Life* 8 (Oct. 1953): 159, and Cornelius Krahn, "Ludwig Keller: A Prophet and a Scholar," *Mennonite Life* 21 (Oct. 1966): 84.
- ² Julia Hildebrandt, "Antje Brons als Mennoniten," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 23 (1966): 43; Bernhard Brons, *Antje Brons . . .* (Kaiserslautern: Buchdruckerei Heinr. Kohl, 1903), p. 4-13.
- ³ [Anna Brons.] *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale der Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten* (Norden: Dledr. Soltau, 1884), p. v-vii.
- ⁴ Brons, *Ursprung*, p. viii; B. Brons, pp. 10-11, 26-30.
- ⁵ *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Anna Brons" and "Isaak Brons."
- ⁶ Dr. Anne Schluter, personal letter to the author, 23 March 1984.
- ⁷ Hildebrandt, pp. 48-49.
- ⁸ Hildebrandt, pp. 48-49, 52-53, 57; [Samuel] Cramer, "Frau Brons," *Doopsgezinde*

- Bydragen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1902, rpt. in B. Brons), p. 39.
- ⁹ Ludwig Keller, "Anna Brons . . .," *Monatshefte der Comenius-Gesellschaft* 11 (Aug.-Oct. 1902): 242.
- ¹⁰ Hildebrandt, p. 49; Cramer, p. 39; B. Brons, p. 28-29.
- ¹¹ Letter from Anna Brons to Ludwig Keller, 20 March 1884, Keller Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas. All letters between Brons and Keller are from the Keller Collection.
- ¹² Hildebrandt, p. 49-50; Anna Brons to Isaac Brons, 20 Feb. 1830, in B. Brons, p. 22; A. Brons to L. Keller, 10 Sept. 1833.
- ¹³ Brons, *Ursprung*, p. xi-xii, 332.
- ¹⁴ Brons to Keller, 20 March 1884.
- ¹⁵ Brons, *Ursprung*, p. 333.
- ¹⁶ Hildebrandt, p. 54.
- ¹⁷ Hildebrandt, pp. 50-52.
- ¹⁸ Hildebrandt, p. 53.
- ¹⁹ Christine Hege, *Kurze Geschichte der Mennoniten* (Frankfurt: Herman Minjon, 1909), p. 86.
- ²⁰ Keller to Brons, 8 June 1886 (all letters of Keller to Brons are rough drafts).
- ²¹ Brons, *Ursprung*, pp. 11-13, 55.
- ²² Brons to Keller, 18 April 1884.
- ²³ Keller, "Anna Brons," pp. 243-44.
- ²⁴ Heinold Fast, "Mennonitischer Apostollikumstreit," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 41 (1984): 57.
- ²⁵ Brons, *Ursprung*, p. xli.
- ²⁶ Hildebrandt, p. 57.
- ²⁷ Cramer, p. 42.
- ²⁸ Keller, "Anna Brons," pp. 243-44.
- ²⁹ Brons to Keller, 18 May 1885.
- ³⁰ Brons, *Ursprung*, pp. v, ix.
- ³¹ Brons, *Ursprung*, p. v, 355.
- ³² *Mennonitisches Lexikon und Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Ludwig Keller."
- ³³ Cramer, p. 40.
- ³⁴ Heinold Fast, "Verzeichnis der Briefe und Schriftstücke aus dem Nachlass von Antje Brons," Keller Collection.
- ³⁵ Cramer, pp. 40-41.
- ³⁶ Katherine Hooge and John B. Toews, "General Register of Materials of the Ludwig Keller Collection: General Correspondence," 1969, Keller Collection; Fast, "Verzeichnis."
- ³⁷ Keller, "Anna Brons," p. 243.
- ³⁸ Brons to Keller, 14 March 1883; For an annotated transcription of this letter, see Heinold Fast, "Das deutsche Mennonitentum 1883: Ein Brief von Antje Brons and Ludwig Keller," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter*, 25 (1968): 6-13.
- ³⁹ Brons to Keller, 14 March 1883; *ML*, s.v. "Dr. Samuel Cramer."
- ⁴⁰ Brons to Keller, 28 Nov. 1886.
- ⁴¹ [Jacob] Ellenberger, "Was ist der Grund, dass unsere Gemeinden nicht zunehmen?" *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* 15 (1884), 4-5, 12-13; Brons to Keller, 18 April 1884.
- ⁴² Brons to Keller, 14 March 1883.
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- ⁴⁴ Brons to Keller, 6 June 1883.
- ⁴⁵ Keller to Brons, 15 Sept. 1897.
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- ⁶⁴ Brons to Keller, 11 Feb. 1901.
- ⁶⁵ Anna Brons, personal letter to granddaughter Anna, 15 March 1889.
- ⁶⁶ Schlueter; Hildebrandt, p. 42.
- ⁶⁷ Brons to Keller, 29 June 1897.
- ⁶⁸ Pataky, p. 107.
- ⁶⁹ Brons to Keller, 29 June 1897.
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Book Reviews

John L. Ruth, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship, A Narrative Account of Life in the Oldest Mennonite Community in North America.* Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1984. 616 pages.

John L. Ruth claims not to be a historian. His first interest was literature (Harvard PhD, 1968), but he was forced into history because the historians had done such a woefully inadequate job of chronicling the information he needed to create more imaginative Mennonite literature with integrity.

Counties, Pennsylvania (as well as grandchildren of the Rhine Valley in Europe). Ruth is a master at evoking the life-style of a people within a particular environment through the telling of stories and the recounting of concrete details. We get to know what people tasted in eat and drink, how they rejoiced in birth and grieved in death, how the clothes they wore reflected their convictions and their temptations, what technological changes meant for their sense of community, and much more. Here we can experience the changing texture of life of conservative Mennonites, often smiling with the author at the implicit ironies, but never laughing derisively or angrily judging

Maintaining the Right Fellowship, a history of the Franconia Conference and its offshoot Eastern District of the General Conference, is Ruth's fourth history book. He is now busy on yet another work of history—this time on the Lancaster Conference of Mennonites. Never have we benefitted so much from such a reluctant writer of history.

Ruth's historical writings share a set of common characteristics and preoccupations. He is always at pains to give his readers a keen sense of time and place. His *Conrad Grebel* was the "Son of Zurich." Here the Franconia Mennonites are the children of the hills and valleys of Montgomery and Bucks

these people.

Another typical Ruth theme is the primacy of the church as a fellowship of believers. The book's title is a quotation from the section on the doctrine of the church in a 1681 statement by a Palatinate Mennonite leader. The central concern becomes the matter of right fellowship among the believers under Christ. Other concerns—such as right Bible interpretation or right mission and outreach—tend to be subordinated. One consequence of the focus on right fellowship is a conservative bias. Any member proposing innovations in church or community life is open to the charge of disrupting the brotherhood harmony. Ruth tells of many Franconia Conference sons and daughters whose vision was unacceptable at home but who made significant contributions to the church at other places in North America where there was more acceptance of variety.

Maintaining the Right Fellowship is unique among officially commissioned Mennonite conference histories in its dual sponsorship by both the "Old" Mennonite Franconia Conference and the General Conference Eastern District Mennonites, who originated in an 1847 division. The dramatic climax and turning point of the book is that painful split, which Ruth tells in greater detail than it has ever been told before (fifty pages on the years from 1840 through 1847). In Ruth's telling, the role of John H. Oberholzer as leading promoter of change is somewhat less dominant than some other accounts assume. The reader senses that there would have been a Franconia Conference crisis even if Oberholzer had never been ordained. After the 1840s split, the Franconia story becomes one of counterpoint, as these people take "Two Paths into a New Century." Given his own "Old" Mennonite membership and commitments, Ruth's account is remarkably fair and evenhanded. He carries the narrative down to 1947, leaving the last three decades for future historians.

Ruth writes with pastoral intention. He wants his people to know more of their past and to live more faithfully to the insights of their forbears. He ends his books with moving rhetorical flourish. In his book on Mennonites in the American Revolution it was "An Author's Fantasy" which acclaimed the simple and stubborn Mennonite farmers who stood aside from the military

crusade. Ruth concludes this Franconia story with an "Epilogue" in honor of the flawed but worthy endeavors of the people recorded in the previous 500 pages to "bring the will of heaven into earthly relationships." Readers of this volume will be eager for more of whatever flows from the author's creative pen—whether it is history, drama, film or fiction.

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Sara Stambaugh, *I Hear the Reaper's Song*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1984. Pp. 221. (\$12.95 hardback)

I Hear the Reaper's Song is narrated by the ninety-year-old Silas Hershey who looks back seventy five years to the events of the summer of 1896 when he was fifteen. The perspective the reader shares is usually that of the fifteen year old Silas, and only occasionally is reminded that at the time of the narration Silas and Biney, major characters in the events of 1896, are looking after each other in a rest home, remembering, though never talking about, the accident and all that surrounded it.

The strength of the story is the depiction of a rural, Mennonite community, and especially the portrayal of the Hershey family and farm. The characters are highly individualized, imperfect and believable. The routines, relationships, opinions, events (except the big event) that make up the life of Silas, the Hershey family, and the larger Mennonite community in the summer of 1896 are not particularly interesting in themselves, but together they add up to a way of life and a set of values. In this respect the novel is very reminiscent of the "realism" of Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, and Willa Cather whose works were written at about the same time Stambaugh's story is set. Anyone familiar with Frank Norris' *The Octopus* can hardly fail to see the similarity between the central events of that work and Stambaugh's—a locomotive annihilating innocent victims, a herd of sheep in *The Octopus*, Enos Barge and Barbie Hershey in *I Hear the Reaper's Song*.

The single exception to the realism of the novel is the portrayal of Barbie. She is idealized from the beginning, her on-

ly flaw being an infrequent headache. This exception may be understandable since she is the sacrificial victim of the story and the favorite sister of young Silas. The narrator confesses that "Sitting here in the Home, it could be I remember things better than they were."

The major conflict of the story is a tension between two views of religion within the Mennonite community. One part of the community, including the entire Hershey family before the accident, were traditional Mennonites who believed that infant baptism was anathema and that when people got old enough to make a responsible decision they decided to join the church. The other part of the community led by Bishop Eby was encouraging missions, evangelism, and the conversion of everyone in the Mennonite churches. This group was accused of being practically "Methodist" (which was not meant to be complimentary). In the first half of the story, the characters and setting are the central focus, and this tension is subordinate. But in the last part of the book the conflict with the church has engulfed everything and everyone.

If the detailed depiction of character and setting is the strength of the work, the handling of the religious positions in conflict is the work's weakness. Although Stambaugh claims in the "Afterword" that she is not an apologist for one side, the resolution of the conflict as experienced by the young Silas story amounts to very slanted polemic. The climactic ideological confrontation of the two sides is the discussion near the end of the book between old Peter the Hermit (a traditional Mennonite) and Willis Shirk (a convert and suitor to Martha Hershey, Silas' sister). In this dramatic confrontation Silas' emotional loyalties are given support by Peter's logic. Peter's position is further supported by the fact that Martha, an early convert of the evangelicals, "didn't seem so taken with Willis as she was before, as if she didn't trust him the way she had at first. . . ." Perhaps, since Silas is fifteen, an adolescent treatment of the ideas in conflict is justifiable; nevertheless, the reader feels betrayed by the author when all the genuinely believable characters are finally judged by this adolescent level of insight.

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Lyon F. C. Steiffen
Uebersetzung von
der Originalarbeit.

Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale
der
Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten
in
kurzen Zügen übersichtlich dargestellt
von
Frauenhand.

Christum vermag niemand wahrlich
zu erkennen, es sei denn, dass er ihm
nachfolge im Leben. Hans Denck.

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Druck von Diedr. Soltan.
1884.