



CANADIAN MENNONITE BRETHREN AND LANGUAGE TRANSITION,
1940-1970

In 1907 a Russian Mennonite correspondent to the *Friedenstimme* wrote, "If we are conscious of our peoplehood, the use and understanding of the German language is essential. Correct German thinking, correct German feeling, correct German speaking will always be a blessing and also promote correct Christian thinking and action."¹ A little over a decade later, J. W. Neufeld, a Mennonite Brethren minister with experience in both Canada and the United States complained in the *Zionsbote* that among first generation Mennonite Brethren immigrants, English had become so mixed with German that it was scarcely recognizable, and the second generation spoke only English. In his mind, there was no doubt that German would soon be lost, with serious results for Mennonite Brethren faith.² In the summer of 1945, B. B. Janz toured the young-adult missions efforts of Alberta and shared his reflections with H. F. Klassen.³ Sadly pessimistic, the only certainty Janz saw in the future was the "ruin of all that is good."⁴ Unless German could be retained long enough to facilitate a smooth transition to English, he feared

¹Quoted by John B. Toews in *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 41.

²J. W. Neufeld, "Etwas zum Nachdenken", *Zionsbote* (Hillsboro, Kansas), September 15, 1920, pp. 13-14.

³B. B. Janz, "Aus andern Provinzen", *Das Konferenz-Jugendblatt der Mennoniten Brudergemeinde von Manitoba*, (March 1945), p. 13.

⁴Janz wrote, "*Untergang alles bestehenden Guten.*"

inevitable "rupture and pain, misunderstanding and contempt."⁵ The June 25, 1952, *Mennonitische Rundschau* carried the third installment of an article entitled "Der Preis der Zweisprachigkeit" by Isaak Regehr of Coaldale. The plight of the German language, he lamented, was like that of Ishmael sent into the desert with Hagar when he seemed to threaten Isaac.⁶ In the end, however, God rescued and blessed Ishmael because of Hagar's prayers; in the same way God would also rescue and bless the bilingualism⁷ of the Mennonites if they too earnestly pled with God.⁸ Nine years later in 1961, C. C. Peters preached the last full-length defence of the German language to be heard at the Canadian Conference. Introducing and concluding his case with Philippians 2:5 and John 17:21 respectively,⁹ he argued that the unity and integrity of the Mennonite Brethren Church depended on the retention of the German language. Within ten years, congregations that had worshipped together first in German and then in German and English, were splitting into separate English and German services.¹⁰

⁵This English phrase hardly captures the power of the German "*Bruch und Schmerz, Verkennung und Verachtung.*"

⁶Genesis 21.

⁷Regehr's interpretation of bilingualism seems to have been a unilingual German Mennonite Brethren Church whose members were also fully competent to function in an English-speaking society.

⁸Isaak Regehr, "Der Preis der Zweisprachigkeit", *Mennonitische Rundschau* LXXVII (June 25, 1952), p. 3.

⁹Philippians 2:5 and John 17:21 read as follows: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus"; "That all of them may be, one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (NIV).

¹⁰The Winkler and Elmwood congregations ratified separate English

These vignettes point to a fundamental shift in the religious experience in Mennonite Brethren. The process of Mennonite Brethren assimilation to North American society brought many changes, some of which were very subtle and beyond the awareness of most Mennonite Brethren believers. The threat posed to the alliance of German and Religion, however, was an immediate and tangible challenge Mennonite Brethren could only escape by leaving the church. The present analysis focuses on the process of Mennonite Brethren language transition in the 1940s, 50s and 60s.¹¹ It grows out of a reading of Canadian Conference proceedings, Mennonite Brethren sponsored periodicals, and case studies of language transition in three Manitoba congregations.¹² These materials show that the assimilation of the English language into Mennonite Brethren faith and practice represents a significant change constituting a fundamental feature of Mennonite Brethren development in the mid-twentieth century. The culture Mennonite Brethren brought with them from their former life in southern Russia adapted to Canadian ways in many respects, but they were determined to retain the

and German services in 1967 and the Portage Avenue congregation did the same in 1970.

¹¹This discussion assumes the radical identification of Mennonite religion and the German language and culture in southern Russia, and the necessary background to the Mennonite migrations of the 1870s and the 1920s. See relevant materials by authorities such as Frank H. Epp, John A. Toews, John B. Toews and James Urry.

¹²These congregations are Winkler, North End-Elmwood and South End-Portage Avenue. The interest of this study has been the actual process of Mennonite Brethren language shift and the experience of Mennonite Brethren at the congregational level. Benjamin Wall Redekop has written a thesis discussing Germanism and the German language as a factor of socio-religious integration and boundary maintenance for Canadian *Russländer* Mennonite Brethren between 1930 and 1960. See "The German Identity of Mennonite Brethren Immigrants in Canada, 1930-1960" (M. A. diss. University of British Columbia, 1990).

central role played by the German language in their religious practice and expression, and the issue of language continuity or shift became a question of deliberate public policy reaching from the foremost councils of the church through to the membership meetings of local congregations. By the 1960s the fight to retain High German as the language of Mennonite Brethren piety and religious practice was lost and the process of Mennonite Brethren becoming "*verenglisched*"¹³ was all but complete.

The period of language transition for Conference institutions stretched from the 1940s to the mid 1960s. By 1965 English was the official working language of the Canadian Conference¹⁴ and the language of the official organ of Canadian Mennonite Brethren.¹⁵ The three congregations used as case studies lagged somewhat behind the Conference but by 1971 all three had converted their main Sunday morning worship service to English.¹⁶ The year 1952 marks a high point of emotional crisis after which the English

¹³This was a derisive term applied by the German-retainers to their co-religionists who were too easily abandoning their German heritage of language and culture for English.

¹⁴"Election of Conference Secretary", in *Minutes of the fifty-fourth Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America convened at Winkler, Manitoba July 4 to July 8, 1964* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Christian Press, 1964), p. 120. Hereafter Conference minutes are identified by date only.

¹⁵"Publications Committee", *Canadian Conference Minutes, June 29 to July 3, 1963*, p. 103.

¹⁶Winkler Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Minutes, November 29, 1967, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba (hereafter CMBS), call number BC-518, reel 90. Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Minutes, CMBS, December 6, 1967, call number BC-522, reel 92. Portage Avenue Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Minutes, CMBS, February 16, 1970, call number BC-525, reel 82. Hereafter congregational records will be identified by congregational name, CMBS call number, and microfilm reel number.

reality seeded in the youth of the 1930s and 40s rapidly matured to bear the fruit of complete transition in the 1960s.

The period to 1952 was punctuated by several critical junctures. Language was a concern of Northern District leaders from the beginning of the conference in 1910¹⁷ but a decade later, Canadian Mennonite Brethren who had immigrated to North America in the 1870s appeared ready to begin the transition process, even as their American co-religionists. The Canadian process, however, was interrupted in the 1920s as these *Kanadier* were overwhelmed by a new wave of German-speakers, the *Russländer*, who took immediate steps to protect their heritage of *Deutsch und Religion*.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the immigrant *Russländer* failed to convince their children that Mennonite Brethren religion and the German language were a necessary unity, and by 1947 English was becoming a significant fact of religious life among younger Canadian Mennonite Brethren.¹⁹ Their leaders were forced to acknowledge that language was becoming a serious problem for the church.

Mennonite Brethren were of different minds regarding German and

¹⁷"Schule", *Verhandlungen der nördlichen Distrikt-Konferenz, 10. und 11. Juli, 1911*, p. 14.

¹⁸This is illustrated by a confrontation of Canadian and American Mennonite Brethren over the inclusion of English-language Bible passages in the Conference *Lektionsheft*. *Verhandlungen der General-Konferenz, vom 30. Mai bis 4. Juni 1930*, pp. 45-46.

¹⁹Bethany Bible School faced a challenge from its graduating students over language in 1935. Margaret Epp, *Proclaim Jubilee!* (n. p., [1976]), p. 44. The Northern District formed a special Bible school commission in 1939, in part occasioned by the language problem. "Schulbestrebungen in unseren Kreisen", *Verhandlungen der Nördlichen Distrikt-Konferenz, vom 8. bis zum 12. Juli 1939*, pp. 24-27. Winkler Bible school had a detailed language policy in 1942. "Der Lehrplan der Bibelschule", *Auskunft ueber die Winkler Bibelschule "Pniel" 1941-42* (n. p.: 1941), 5.

English from the very beginning of the transitional period. Some saw bilingualism as regrettable but necessary, and believing that an eventual transition was inevitable, were willing to take steps in that direction.²⁰ Conversely, parallel steps were taken by others to preserve, strengthen and entrench the German language.²¹ Thus, the disruptive and disuniting potential of the *Sprachfrage* was evident from the outset. The ready linguistic assimilation of first-generation Canadian *Russländer*, however, doomed the campaign of the German-retainers before it began, and this set the stage for twenty years of linguistic tension and painful transition.

The 1950s and 60s mark the period of formal and institutional language change. These two decades began with the establishment, in 1950, of the most obvious symbol of the futile German-retention effort, the Canadian Conference Committee for the Preservation of the German Language.²²

²⁰This is demonstrated by the changing attitude of *Mennonitische Rundschau* editor and Canadian Conference Youth Committee chairperson H. F. Klassen. In 1944 Klassen wrote that converting Mennonite Brethren youth programmes totally to English would be a "sin." H. F. Klassen, "Fragen und Antworten", *Das Konferenz-Jugendblatt der Mennoniten Brudergemeinde von Manitoba*, I (September 1944), p. 3. By 1951 he was warning older Mennonite Brethren that their identification of German and true Mennonite Brethren faith was alienating their youth and the price was too high. "Jugendversammlung am 14. Juli, nachmittags", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 14. bis 18. Juli 1951*, p. 12.

²¹This is well-illustrated by the struggle over language in the early years of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. Both A. H. Unruh and J. B. Toews as the College's first two presidents endorsed a clear parity of English and German in the College programme and this elicited vociferous opposition from others determined to exploit the new College in the cause of German retention. "Schulesache: Das M. B. Bibel-College in Winnipeg", *Berichte und Beschlüsse der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 29. Juni. bis zum 4. Juli 1946*, pp. 98-105.

²²"Geschäftssitzung—Mittwoch nachmittags", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 29. Juli. bis 3. August, 1950*, pp. 90-91.

Created as a poor substitute for the failure of Mennonite Brethren schools to mount a coordinated effort at German retention,²³ the committee was most effective at providing systematic documentation of the advance of English. Pro-German rhetoric of the early 1950s revealed the extent to which some identified their Mennonite Brethren faith with their heritage of German language and Mennonite ethnicity. The German language was the defensive perimeter guarding the integrity of Mennonite Brethren distinctives and identity.²⁴ Parents who failed to speak High German at home were derelict in their duty.²⁵ Children and youth who did not make every effort to learn German were one step away from apostasy. Mennonite Brethren leaders who neglected the urgent struggle to retain the German heritage for the church were failing in their God-appointed mandate. Biblical precept and example were exploited for the cause, and the retention of the German language was declared God's absolute will for the Mennonite people.²⁶

Against this backdrop, the official record documents the relentless advance of English in those sectors of the church most concerned with children and youth. At the same time, progressive leaders prepared for

²³"Eingereichte Fragen", in *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 3. bis 8. Juli 1948*, p. 118; "Fortsetzung—Schulsache: Bibelschulen und Hochschulen", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 2. bis 7. Juli 1949*, pp. 54-58.

²⁴J. J. Janzen, "Mennonitische Tugenden", *Mennonitische Rundschau* LXXV (April 12, 1950), p. 4.

²⁵"Fortsetzung—Schulsache: Bibelschulen und Hochschulen", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 2. bis 7. Juli 1949*, pp. 54-58.

²⁶Isaak Regehr, "Der Preis der Zweisprachigkeit", *Mennonitische Rundschau* LXXVII (June 11, 1952), p. 4; (June 18, 1952), pp. 2-3; (June 25, 1952), p. 3.

transition; the *Youth Worker* and the *M. B. S. S. Instructor* were started within two years of the launch of the German Committee.²⁷ As early as 1945,²⁸ and increasingly into the fifties, some Conference leaders saw a subculture of Mennonite Brethren youth assuming English as its language of piety and mission, and produced a series of publications designed to retain the youth for the church and serve the needs of rising English-speaking lay leaders, while also bridging the language gap by incrementally altering the ratio of German to English in their content. Congregational German school activity peaked in 1951 after which it declined to virtual extinction fifteen years later.²⁹ By 1958 English was being used in more than 95 per cent of Sunday schools and youth groups across the Conference,³⁰ and front-ranking Conference leaders had given up any pretense of protecting a premier status for German among Canadian Mennonite Brethren. Developments such as the proposal for an English family-oriented periodical slowly gaining acceptance,³¹ English and German becoming equally permissible on the

²⁷"Jugendsache", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 5. bis 10. Juli 1952*, pp. 81-84; "Sonntagschul-Sache", *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁸This was the adoption of Manitoba's *Jugendblatt* as a youth paper for the entire Northern District. "Empfehlungen des Jugendkomitees der N. D. Konf. abgehalten in Yarrow, B. C. vom 16-27ten Juni", *Verhandlungen der Nördlichen Distrikt-Konferenz, vom 16. bis zum 21. Juli 1945*, pp. 105-106.

²⁹This is based on a compilation of the number of congregations reporting a German school in the *Year Book of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America*, 1948-1966.

³⁰"Komitee für deutsche Sprache", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 4. bis 8. Juli 1959*, p. 130.

³¹The process of approving and financing a Conference-sponsored English family periodical took from 1957 to 1961. The *Mennonite Brethren Herald* began in 1962.

Conference floor,³² and the disbanding of the Committee for the German Language,³³ prepared the way for the final decision and in 1965 English became the official language of the Canadian Conference.³⁴

Tracing language transition at the Conference level offers a necessary but limited perspective on the language-related religious experience of Mennonite Brethren in the forties, fifties and sixties. Detailed analyses of three congregations and their process of language shift also reveal much about the significance language has had for Mennonite Brethren religion. The examination of an originally *Kanadier* congregation in small-town Winkler and two urban *Russländer*-dominated congregations in Winnipeg, North End-Elmwood and South End-Portage Avenue, discloses a common time frame of transition that stretches from around 1950 to the late sixties. The process of change can be sketched in three steps, the first of which was admitting that a language problem existed in the congregation.

In 1949, as front-ranking Conference leaders were acknowledging the *Sprachfrage*, English was already being used in Winkler's Sunday school and youth programmes while North End and South End reported themselves to be solidly German.³⁵ In the next three years, between 1949 and 1951, all three recognized that their children were losing the ability to function in German,

³²"M. B. Bible College", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 30. Juni bis zum 4. Juli 1962*, p. 162.

³³"Committee of Reference and Counsel", *Canadian Conference Minutes, June 29 to July 3, 1963*, p. 117.

³⁴"Election of Conference Secretary", *Canadian Conference Minutes, July 4 to July 8, 1964*, p. 120.

³⁵Canadian Conference Statistical Records, 1946-1966, CMBS, Winnipeg, Manitoba, call number B340, boxes 19-21.

and two, Winkler and South End, discussed the need for English in the Sunday morning worship service.³⁶ None, however, took any action—as might be expected at a time when a majority of decision-makers still believed that the German language could and should be salvaged as a permanent feature of Mennonite Brethren experience. By 1955 all three congregations had installed full-time professional pastors³⁷ and by 1957 all three pastors had initiated a Christian Education Committees in the congregation.³⁸ Meanwhile, English had been acknowledged in the Sunday schools and youth programmes of the North and South End congregations.³⁹ English Sunday evening services had been introduced in all three congregations as well, and in Winkler and North End these had been specifically initiated by the youth themselves while in South End the admission of English content to the Sunday evening service was explicitly in recognition of non-German-speaking youth.⁴⁰ Weekday youth programming had become almost totally English.

³⁶South End Council Minutes, March 28, 1949, call number BC-525, reel 83; Winkler Council Minutes, November 18, 1951, call number BC518, reel 91; North End Annual Reports, 1951, call number BC-522, reel 92.

³⁷South End Membership Minutes, February 18, 1950, call number BC-525, reel 82; North End Membership Minutes, September 24, 1951, call number BC-522, reel 92; Winkler Membership Minutes, February 7, 1955, call number BC518, reel 90.

³⁸Elmwood Council Minutes, September 13, 1954, call number BC-522, reel 93; South End Membership Minutes, May 18, 1955, call number BC-525, reel 82; Winkler Membership Minutes, November 25, 1957, call number BC518, reel 90.

³⁹Canadian Conference Statistical Records, 1946-1966, CMBS, Winnipeg, Manitoba, call number B340, boxes 19-21.

⁴⁰South End Council Minutes, March 28, 1949, call number BC-525, reel 83; Winkler Council Minutes, January 2, 1954, call number BC518, reel 91; Elmwood Membership Minutes, August 23, 1954, call number BC-522, reel 92.

These developments paralleled the transformation of the *Youth Worker* and the *Instructor* into English resources for Christian Education. Allowing an English sermon in Sunday morning worship was a crucial next step. While this innovation cannot be documented for Winkler, in 1958 both Elmwood and South End substituted an English sermon for the traditional *Gebetstunde* after a two year process initiated by their respective Christian Education Committees.⁴¹ Again, the larger Conference process and the congregational process were roughly in step as 1959 saw the publication of the English translation of the *Gesangbuch*, a resource deliberately designed for bilingual worship.

For almost a decade the three congregations practised bilingual worship, and in each case the transition from bilingual to unilingual English worship proved the most difficult. In Winkler the process was led by the Christian Education Committee and in 1967 the membership came to the very brink of splitting on the issue before the bilingual majority capitulated for the sake of preserving the congregation intact.⁴² That same year, after a four-year process, Elmwood members reversed a previous rejection of their council's recommendation, and agreed that their main Sunday morning service become totally English.⁴³ In 1961 South End had divided into the

⁴¹South End Mennonite Brethren Church Sunday Morning Bulletin, September 14, 1958; Elmwood Membership Minutes, December 8, 1958, call number BC-522, reel 92.

⁴²Winkler Membership Minutes, June 7, 1967, call number BC-518, reel 90.

⁴³Elmwood Membership Minutes, December 6, 1967, call number BC-522, reel 92.

bilingual Portage Avenue and the unilingual German Central congregations.⁴⁴ Portage Avenue repeatedly reaffirmed its determination to remain bilingual until 1970 when its members also accepted separate German and English Sunday morning services.⁴⁵ In all three cases, Winkler, Elmwood and Portage Avenue, the final stage of transition occurred immediately after a pastoral resignation and before a new pastor had completely taken over the leadership. While pastoral transition probably provided the occasion for the final step of formal transition, it is also true that by 1965 the Canadian Conference had withdrawn virtually all support for German as the language of continuing Mennonite Brethren faith and practice. With the Conference now publishing both the *Herald* and the *Rundschau* and those holding a Canadian Mennonite Brethren membership having their choice of one or the other, the unity of *Deutsch und Religion* had been broken. The decline and eventual extinction of Mennonite Brethren bilingualism was in sight.

It is apparent that the main steps of transition in the three cases are reasonably coincident with one another, and with the process in the Conference at large. Nevertheless, despite all three congregations being located in Manitoba, with the leaders and members of these congregations in frequent contact with each other, the internal transition of each seems self-contained, with no explicit evidence of one depending upon or borrowing from another. In surveying the three case studies, however, the similarities are more striking than the differences. One might expect that Winkler, with its

⁴⁴South End Membership Minutes, May 3, 1960, call number BC-525, reel 82.

⁴⁵Portage Avenue Membership Minutes, February 16, 1970, call number BC-525, reel 82.

much longer history and *Kanadier* background would have had an easier and earlier transition than North End-Elmwood and South End-Portage Avenue, but such is not the case. Winkler did declare a higher amount of English usage in Sunday school and youth in 1949,⁴⁶ and in view of the German instruction available in public school, never had a congregational German school. It also happens that it is impossible to document the onset of bilingual preaching from the congregational records. These, however, are the most significant differences between the rural Winkler and the two urban congregations in Winnipeg.

The commonalities among the three congregations are the more striking. Winkler adopted unilingual English worship the same year as Elmwood. Winkler's brush with bitter division was even more clearly language-related than the separation that racked South End-Portage Avenue. All three recognized the language challenge within a few years of each other and almost two decades later completed the process within a four-year span. The process of language confrontation and concrete change followed two significant and related innovations in each case: the introduction of the professional pastorate, and the institutionalization of the needs of children and youth in a Christian Education Committee. In all three instances the Christian Education Committee was specifically introduced by the pastor, and took a pro-English advocacy role on behalf of the younger segment of the congregation. When these similarities are combined with the similar chronologies of change followed by each, it is apparent that the *Kanadier-*

⁴⁶Canadian Conference Statistical Records, 1946-1966, CMBS, Winnipeg, Manitoba, call number B340, boxes 19-21.

Russländer and urban-rural distinctions did not result in significant differences in their language transition.

This conclusion is further supported by instances where two congregations share a common feature in contrast to the third. In two cases, Elmwood and South End, youth were engaged in English-language community outreach at the periphery of the congregation well in advance of any significant internal linguistic accommodation,⁴⁷ and in both cases, members refused to integrate the clients of these ministries into the mainstream of the congregation. Winkler and South End, the congregations that suffered the most tension, made extensive use of questionnaires to raise the awareness of members and try to forge a consensus among them. Elmwood, the congregation that suffered the least overt strife also had the pastor with the longest tenure, I. W. Redekopp. He also appears to be the most skilled and capable of the pastors encountered, although J. H. Quiring made an effective start in Winkler. Both came from the ranks of the Bible College faculty, and both tried to implement language transition as a positive programme of incremental change. Jacob Neufeld of South End, not as well trained, less aggressive by nature, and leading a congregation with a history of internal tension, almost collapsed under the strain of trying to meet the needs of a growing English minority while shackled with an unresponsive German

⁴⁷In 1944 South End had a mission Sunday school with 150 registered students and an attendance of about seventy. South End Membership Minutes, December 9, 1944, call number BC-525, reel 82. In 1951 the Elmwood *Jugendabend* programme served more than 200 young people who distributed tracts and Christian literature on the street and spoke to individuals about their spiritual welfare, distributed Christmas cheer, conducted street meetings, and ran an English summer Bible school for sixty children. North End Annual Reports, 1951, call number BC-522, reel 92.

majority.⁴⁸ Part of the trauma faced by both Elmwood and South End in considering bilingual worship was the difficult choice between an English sermon that would serve as a significant signal of inclusion for the younger segment of the congregation, and the Sunday morning *Gebetstunde* that served as an important participatory experience for older rank and file members. Giving up the *Gebetstunde* was a costly concession on the part of the aging German establishment, and having made this sacrifice, it was not soon ready to be segregated from the emerging English majority and relegated to a shorter German service of obviously inferior status.

The synopsis provided in the preceding paragraphs has outlined the scope and sequence of Mennonite Brethren language transition in the forties, fifties and sixties. It remains to identify some of the key factors that contributed to the transitional process. The present study highlights some factors at the expense of others because of the nature of its sources. It is derived from internal documents that present the story of language transition from the perspective of two specific groups: denominational and congregational leaders, and Mennonite Brethren who contributed to periodicals. Thus, the voice of most rank and file members is heard only through their yea or nay in the voting process. A study including material from oral sources or sources exterior to the Mennonite Brethren community could conceivably disclose other important dynamics. Furthermore, this investigation does not touch the larger and more general factors inherent in the social assimilation of any immigrant group into a new and different host

⁴⁸South End Council Minutes, January 5 and 19, 1957, call number BC-525, reel 83.

society. These limitations, however, do not prevent this analysis from disclosing concrete evidence of some of the internal dynamics that affected the exchange of English for German as the primary language of religious experience.

The potential dynamic for change was created by the immigrant experience. Mennonite Brethren, who together with other Mennonites had maintained the unity of religion and High German within a larger Russian-speaking context, were now confronted with a new English-speaking social reality. As immigrants in Canadian society, they did not, in the long term, maintain the linguistic boundaries around their religious experience despite the determined efforts of many to do so. A primary factor in the process relates to education. In Russia Mennonites had largely controlled their own education, but in North America this was impossible and in Canada *Kanadier* Mennonites across the spectrum, from more conservative to more accommodationist, struggled with this issue.⁴⁹ Mennonite Brethren in the United States confronted the challenge around the turn of the century.⁵⁰ After 1910 *Kanadier* Mennonite Brethren in the largely Canadian Northern District founded the Herbert Bible school and sought to protect their privilege of extracurricular German religious instruction in the public schools. The

⁴⁹The role of education in the cultural retention of Canadian Mennonites has been presented in a paper by Frank H. Epp, "Educational Institutions and Cultural Retention in Canada: the Mennonite Experience", TMs [photocopy]. Paper presented to the Canadian Historical Society meeting at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, June 1, 1978.

⁵⁰The earliest and most deliberate attempt by American Mennonite Brethren to mount an education-based resistance to English assimilation was their short-lived sponsorship of the German department at McPherson College in the late 1890s. P. F. Dürksen, "Deutsches Department in McPherson College, McPherson Kansas", *Zionsbote* (Hillsboro, Kansas), June 8, 1898, p. 2.

fact remains, however, that Mennonite Brethren children were being educated in English, and the coming of the *Russländer* did nothing to change this. The Bible schools, the graded German Sunday school curriculum, the congregational German school, all of which received significant impetus with the coming of the *Russländer*, were intended in part to substitute for the German day-school of the Russian Mennonite colonies, but they failed to capture Canadian-born Mennonite Brethren children and youth for the German language. As the process advanced, education was also enlisted on the pro-English, pro-transition side of the issue. Whatever some in the constituency hoped, the Bible College was bilingual from the start. Periodicals such as the *Jugendblatt*, the *Youth Worker* and the *Instructor* were all oriented towards the Christian education of the youth. The transition process in each of the three case-studies was given significant impetus by Christian Education Committees. Thus, education ranks as a factor of first importance in Mennonite Brethren language transition.

A second factor promoting transition is related to the first. Mennonite Brethren had a relatively new history as a renewal movement among Mennonites, and a soteriology explicitly based on personal conversion. The religious dynamic of their 1860 schism from the *Kirchliche* Mennonites in Russia had been supplied by a conviction that authentic Christianity consisted of crisis conversion, occasioned by a profound sense of personal sinfulness, leading to a daily life of ethical purity and public witness, validated by the *Gemeinde* in adult baptism and protected by rigorous congregational discipline.⁵¹ This religious ideology had several implications for language and

⁵¹Calvin Redekop has summarized the importance of the congregation

religion. When combined with the idealism of youth, it was a powerful motivation for outreach and mission. It also militated against a nominal faith satisfied with formal observance and relatively passive religious allegiances.

Evidence of this religious activism is supplied by the youth of both North End-Elmwood and South End who mounted sizable English extension Sunday schools at arm's length from the congregation and organized other English language ministries ranging from "rescue mission" work to tract distribution on the street. Thus, as Mennonite Brethren youth were educated in English, and attended Bible schools that drew some of their inspiration from North American revivalism, they moved out into their English-speaking communities, and in the process thoroughly integrated their personal Mennonite Brethren faith with the English language. This was the new reality that dawned on B. B. Janz in 1945 after a first-hand examination of young-adult summer outreach ministries in Alberta. For Janz the unity of Mennonite Brethren religion and German was ruined. He already feared the possibility of schism and only hoped that a bilingual phase could be extended long enough to avoid it.⁵²

This introduces the tertiary factor of language transition, the role of leadership. The failure of German-language educational efforts and the integration of English and practical religion by the youth apparently convinced many front-ranking leaders that bilingualism was, at best, a

in understanding the Mennonite ethos in *Mennonite Society*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 62-65.

⁵²B. B. Janz, "Aus andern Provinzen", *Das Konferenz-Jugendblatt der Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde von Manitoba*, (March 1945), p. 13.

stress-relieving step on the way to full language transition. Seen in this light, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren purchase of the Christian Press and the *Rundschau* in 1946⁵³ balances the 1945 introduction of the bilingual *Jugendblatt*,⁵⁴ and in the words of B. B. Janz, was an effort to "regulate the situation."⁵⁵ The Committee for the Preservation of the German Language served quite well as a safety vent for pro-German rhetoric but it had little effect on the pace of the transition process. H. F. Klassen of the Christian Press, which provided the *Rundschau* for Mennonite German enthusiasts, also launched the *Mennonite Observer* in 1955 at a strategic juncture,⁵⁶ and the leader-driven buy-out of the Press helped to introduce the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*.

At the local level, all the pastors recruited from the ranks of the Bible College faculty to serve the three case-study-congregations, except H. H. Janzen, took progressive steps to promote language transition. Of the case-study pastoral leaders, only D. K. Dürksen of North End took a definite pro-German stance. Hermann Lenzmann of Winkler tried to maintain the bilingual status quo while the remaining pastors all took their own steps to

⁵³"Bericht von der Christian Press oder 'Die Rundschau' wie viele nicht nur die Zeitschrift, sondern auch das Geschäft nennen", *Berichte und Beschlüsse der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 29. Juni. bis zum 4. Juli 1946*, p. 74.

⁵⁴"Empfehlungen des Jugendkomitees der N. D. Konf. abgehalten in Yarrow, B. C. vom 16—27ten Juni", *Verhandlungen der Nördlichen Distrikt-Konferenz, vom 16. bis zum 21. Juli 1945*, pp. 105-106.

⁵⁵"Die Konferenzbotschaft", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 3. bis 8. Juli 1954*, p. 14.

⁵⁶"Bericht über Christian Press", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 30. Juni. bis 5. Juli 1956*, p. 10.

move the process of transition along to a peaceful conclusion. Thus, while many leaders were not militantly pro-English, they tended to view transition to English as inevitable and were unwilling to sacrifice their youth or the unity of their congregations and conference on the altar of German retention. At the same time, they were deeply concerned to meet the needs of the older generation and preserve as much goodwill as possible on the road to complete transition. There is no doubt that language was one of the most intractable issues facing denominational and congregational leaders in the forties, fifties and sixties.

If education, mission and outreach, and leadership all tend to explain the advance of language transition, what are the factors that created the problem in the first place? Why did Mennonite Brethren not simply progress through a smooth and orderly incremental exchange of English for German? Immigration must be given chronological priority as a factor creating the problem of language. While this study has restricted itself to the Canadian scene, another investigation waits to be made for North American Mennonite Brethren who originated in the 1870s migration. It is certain that by 1920 some pro-German supporters had all but given up, saying that the second generation was almost completely English and the cause of German-speaking Mennonite Brethren faith was virtually lost.⁵⁷ By 1929 English content had

⁵⁷J. W. Neufeld, "Etwas zum Nachdenken", *Zionsbote* (Hillsboro, Kansas), September 15, 1920, pp. 13-14. Neufeld was a Russian-born ordained minister who emigrated to Canada in 1906, founded the Bethania, Saskatchewan congregation in 1913 and moved to the United States in 1920 where he ministered in the Los Angeles congregation for twenty-two years. John H. Lohrenz, *The Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas: The Board of Foreign Missions of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, 1950), p. 312.

become a necessity in Sunday school material intended for American Mennonite Brethren.⁵⁸ In 1943 English became their official language, and ten years later they published their English hymnal. Without prejudging the course of language transition among American Mennonite Brethren, this study has taken the position that *Kanadier* Mennonite Brethren were on the threshold of commencing their transition in the 1920s.

The significance of immigration as a factor in this study lies in the arrival of the numerically overwhelming and staunchly German *Russländer* after 1920, a development that delayed the Canadian transition for a generation. The smaller German Mennonite immigration after World War II did not materially slow the pace of transition in the Conference at large, but it probably had some local effect. Thus, it is possible that the segment of the South End congregation that split off into the German-speaking Central congregation was significantly comprised of these more recently arrived immigrants. Still, it was the *Russländer* that led the fight to retain the German language. Their concerns were threefold. The German language represented a significant hedge protecting Mennonite Brethren identity and community from the encroaching dangers of English Canadian society. Secondly, some Mennonite Brethren, when presented with the prospect of becoming *verenglisched*, discovered that they believed the German language itself to have a sacred status. Furthermore, the German language represented an indispensable link to a culture and heritage many believed to

⁵⁸"Eingereichte Fragen", in *Verhandlungen der 20. Nördlichen Distrikt-Konferenz der Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinde von Nord Amerika. Abgehalten vom 29. Juni bis zum 3. Juli 1929, zu Herbert, Saskatchewan, Canada* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1929), pp. 72-74.

be intrinsically superior to English culture in general and Canadian culture in particular.

If personal religion and evangelism provided one important aspect of Mennonite Brethren self-understanding, the separate integrity of the congregation, the *Gemeinde*, was another. For Mennonite Brethren thrown into an alien social environment, the *Gemeinde* represented an ethos of separation from the world and the primary social institution providing identity, meaning and purpose in the midst of daily life. For ordinary members, it represented their strongest tie to an increasingly idealized past, and a refuge from the strangeness of their new world. The exclusive use of High German in the *Gemeinde* offered a powerful mark of differentiation and a hedge against dangerous assimilation to the ways of what older Mennonite Brethren considered the "barbarians" around them.⁵⁹

The sentiments of *Rundschau* contributors such as J. J. Janzen and Gerhard Cornies in 1950⁶⁰, both of whom appear not to have been leaders, provide two examples of this attitude. Two more telling examples are provided by South End and Elmwood. In 1952, as the reaction against the creeping encroachment of English was at its peak, the South End congregation voted to end sponsorship of its decade-old English mission Sunday school.

⁵⁹A general overview of the importance of the Mennonite Brethren *Gemeinde* and the German language in the context of cultural assimilation between 1930 and 1960 is supplied by Benjamin Redekop in a chapter entitled "Germanism and Brethren Congregational Life: The Struggle for Socio-Religious Integrity" in his thesis "The German Identity of Mennonite Brethren Immigrants in Canada, 1930-1960", pp. 115-161.

⁶⁰J. J. Janzen, "Mennonitische Tugenden", *Mennonitische Rundschau* LXXV (April 12, 1950), p. 4; Gerhard Cornies, "Rettet die Muttersprache", *Mennonitische Rundschau* LXXV (June 21, 1950), p. 7 and (June 27, 1950), p. 2.

South End was unwilling to integrate young English-speaking converts from non-Mennonite backgrounds into its *Gemeinde*.⁶¹ Even more specific is the example of Elmwood in 1965 when members rejected a proposal sponsored jointly by the Good Tidings Sunday school, the Christian Education Committee and the council, to end bilingual worship in favour of segregated worship so that community people could be integrated into an English worship service. The fact that English was already a part of the Elmwood service is very instructive. By 1965 the issue was not the introduction of English, but the retention of German, and Mennonite Brethren members were willing to overrule their leaders to retain the German and keep *Engländer* out.⁶²

This introduces the third factor that contributed to the volatility of the German question for Mennonite Brethren. In the forties, fifties and sixties, at least some Mennonite Brethren believed that the German language deserved a sacred status. While some attempt was made to deny, or at least qualify this identification of language and religion, for others, it was a natural extension of the strongly chauvinist attitudes many, if not most, *Russländer* immigrants harboured for their adopted German heritage. Thus, German was not only a hedge against worldly corruption but a positive gift from God to the Mennonite people. It is at this crucial point that the language issue points to the ethnocentricity of Mennonite Brethren religion in

⁶¹Specifically, South End members decided "to transfer the English Sunday school to the Logan Street Mission so that the children will receive care as they grow older and when they want to become baptized." South End Membership Minutes, January 24, 1952, call number BC-525, reel 82.

⁶²The Good Tidings Sunday School had 150 members with an average attendance of ninety including a class for mothers from the community. Elmwood Membership Minutes, September 23, 1965, call number BC-522, reel 92.

this period. While the evidence is somewhat muted in the official record, it is sufficient to validate this important conclusion. In 1949 F. C. Thiessen, a leading Mennonite Brethren educator from British Columbia declared it to be God's will that Mennonite Brethren children be born into German-speaking families. God did not intend Mennonite Brethren to adopt the English language.⁶³ At the 1951 convention David Neuman of the Ontario Youth Committee alluded to the concern of youth that their elders were ethnocentric and not bibliocentric in their faith.⁶⁴ Later at the same convention, the German Committee felt constrained to confront the confusion of language and salvation in the first sentence of its initial report to the Conference.⁶⁵ In the 1952 *Rundschau* typeface controversy, correspondents used biblical citations to charge editor H. F. Klassen with his responsibility to defend the German language.⁶⁶ Isaac Regehr in his 1952 "*Der Preis der Zweisprachigkeit*" implied that German was the divinely ordained birthright of the Mennonite people and to reject it was to commit the sin of Esau in selling Isaac's blessing for a mess of pottage.⁶⁷ The tendency make the German language itself central and essential to Mennonite Brethren religion

⁶³"Fortsetzung—Schulsache: Bibelschulen und Hochschulen", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 2. bis 7. Juli 1949*, pp. 54-58.

⁶⁴"Jugendversammlung am 14. Juli, nachmittags", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 14. bis 18. Juli 1951*, p. 12.

⁶⁵"Wir sind als Komitee wohl bewusst dass eine Sprache nicht selig macht." "Bericht vom Komitee fuer deutsche Sprache", *Verhandlungen der Kanadischen Konferenz, vom 14. bis 18. Juli 1951*, p. 58.

⁶⁶K. K., *Mennonitische Rundschau* LXXVII (April 9, 1952), p. 11.

⁶⁷Isaak Regehr, "Der Preis der Zweisprachigkeit", *Mennonitische Rundschau* LXXVII (June 25, 1952), p. 3.

was probably more prevalent among rank and file members than leaders, but the pain and turmoil of the language transition is at least partly explained by this factor.

The significance of language transition for Mennonite Brethren is implicit in the six factors outlined above. Education, mission, leadership, the realities of immigrant life, religious and ethnic separation, and a tendency to sacralize one's mother tongue: all these denote significant features of Canadian Mennonite Brethren experience in the middle of the twentieth century. Lifting out these six elements from the forgoing analysis merely illustrates the complex and even contradictory nature of the dynamics at work. The opposing forces set in motion by cultural assimilation and mission on the one hand, and an ideology of separation and cultural superiority on the other proved so intractable that, in a sense, the fears of schism were finally proven true. A generation after the arrival of the *Russländer* Mennonite Brethren were compromising their core value of a bonded congregational unit as congregation after congregation made the painful decision to split its worshipping community on the basis of linguistic preference. This conclusion alone is sufficient to show that language transition was a highly significant feature of Mennonite Brethren experience, and that it must be taken into account when seeking to understand Canadian Mennonite Brethren religion in the middle of the twentieth century.

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