

"Growing Up and Down in Steinbach"

"Growing Up and Down in Steinbach in the 30s and 40s,"

by Professor Al Reimer, 116 Words worth Bay, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3K 0J6. Speech presented at the HSHS A.G.M.

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When Del Plett suggested I talk about growing up in Steinbach, I thought it would be an easy and enjoyable talk to prepare. With so many memories and materials to draw on, however, it wasn't easy to decide what to include and what to leave out. Del had one other suggestion. "We want the Kehler side of your personality," he said, "not the Reimer side." I knew what he meant, of course. He wanted me to be lively and funny like my eight Kehler uncles, tell outrageous stories (*Schmetteriete*) and get you all rolling in the aisles.

The trouble is, I'm not as funny as my Kehler uncles were (maybe there's too much sober Reimer in me) and, also, they told their hilarious stories in private and *opp Plautdietsch*. So far as I know, none of them ever made a public speech, while I'm addressing a large, sophisticated audience and have to do it in English, which for a Mennonite of my generation is not nearly as good a language to be funny in as Low German is.

My talkative and colourful Kehler uncles are all, alas, gone now, but I still cherish their memory. The Kehlert liked to say: "Wann een Kjala stoaft, motte se am noch oppoat de Frat dootschlone." Loosely translated, "When a Kehler dies, you have to make sure his mouth is dead too." The Kehler brothers came to our house often because their mother, my Kehler grandmother, lived with us when I was a boy. They were all hard-working farmers or manual labourers at the time and enjoyed teasing my dignified father for making his living as a "lazy" schoolteacher. I expressed my feelings for my uncles in a poem I wrote after the last of them passed away a few years ago.

Song for my Kehler Uncles
Oh, they were lively sticks of dynamite,
my eight lusty Kehler uncles:
When they lit the short fuse of their mirth
the exploding tall tales mowed down all
unwary sobersides in helpless laughter.
They could make the local welkin ring
the Low German air tum blue
for miles around with their crackling salvos
of comic gusto.
They needed no wine or beer or schnapps
to lubricate their verbal bearings.
Peanuts, sunflower seeds and strong black coffee
mechanized their jaws and greased their vocal cords.
A hooting, irreverent pack of garrulous brothers
they raised the roof and buckled the walls
of my father's house when they came hog-calling
on Sunday afternoons and shattered the sober
sabbath air with coarse jokes and windy yams,
spitting exuberantly over the little fence
of decorum my studious schoolteacher father
had built out of book-words and self-esteem.
There he sat, my well-mannered sire, at bay,
trying in vain to match wits with the grinning
invaders gleefully closing in on him
behind thick barrages of spat-out sunflower husks
and piles of smoking peanut shells.

Shell-shocked, my father surveyed his teetering abode through smoke-reddened eyes, yearning helplessly for Monday morning and the parade-square order of his classroom.

Meanwhile my *Groosmame*, the tiny wizened lady who had spawned these droll anarchists, these wisecracking freebooters, sat corner-quiet in her black-lace *Huw* looking dazed and fragile and disavowing.

While my mother, sharing her brothers' raucous genes, would bustle and banter, loudly enjoying it all including, it seemed, the discomfiture of her earnest, well-bred husband.

So long ago.

One by one my uncles took their leave, having, like Falstaff, larded the lean earth with their sweat, their brazen voices stilled at last.

And I am left to mourn and call in vain,
"Najo, komt wada, wie se' je tus."

You know, all my life I've had trouble telling the truth--I mean the literal, factual truth (you're probably thinking that's the Kehler in me). It's not that I'm a real liar out to deceive people or gain an advantage. No, the truth is I can't tell the literal truth about anything that interests me because my imagi-



Johann S Kehler, drafted in Alberta during WWI. Johann was one of the hilarious Kehler uncles referred to by Al Reimer. Later Johann became the famous "Fiey-Dokta", see Glenn Kehler, "de Fiey Dokta," Pres., No. 14, pages 87-88.

nation gets in the way and starts making story out of the bare facts. In fact, we all do that to one degree or another, especially about our personal past.

We like to think of memory as a kind of tape recorder providing us with an accurate, reliable transcript of the past, but it's really more like a movie camera that selects sights and sounds from a certain perspective and provides us with a highly selective film of the past. No two people will ever tell stories based on similar incidents and experiences in quite the same way.

So this is my personal memory film of growing up in Steinbach in the 30s and 40s, a world I didn't choose but which chose me. For me this was a wonderful place to be a boy in but, as my title suggests, a somewhat less wonderful place to be a teenager in, especially during the sombre war years.

But this I know: although I left it a long time ago, I carry Steinbach in my bloodstream for life.

The Steinbach I was a boy in was still a quiet, somewhat remote rural village perched on the harsh Manitoba plain, its Main Street cutting boldly across the township square alongside the twisted little creek that came miraculously alive with runoff water every spring. For years there was a road sign at the northern end of Main Street which read: "Welcome to Steinbach: pop 1052."

One year a local man was killed in a car accident, as I remember it, and some wag crossed out the "2" and put in a "1". That's the kind of peaceful, stable place it was then.

On summer mornings in the thirties I awoke to two very different sounds. The one I loved in all its raucous, sleep-piercing suddenness was the shrill, quavery blast of the cowherd's horn as he drove the village cows along Main Street to the common pasture west of town. The second sound, less dramatic but much more persistent, was the industrial hum coming from C.T. Loewen's bee supply factory a block away on Main. These two sounds have come to symbolize for me the two contrasting Steinbachs I grew up in. The cowherd's horn was sounding the last defiant squawk of the old Darp against the smoothly efficient technology of the developing business town.

Main Street was where it all happened even then. From the beginning its broad mile was the backbone that held together the anatomy of the community. It was also the town's central nervous system. Main Street has always set the pace and rhythm for Steinbachers. The whole town takes its character from the street, and as it has grown and prospered so has the town. Even during the lean Depression years of my boyhood, there was always something vital and expectant about Main Street, as though it were already waiting for the smart new commercial buildings and crowded car lots with their thrusting neon signs we see today.

In the thirties Main Street was homely enough with its dingy false-fronted buildings and gravelled surface. Only the central blocks had paved sidewalks, with wooden sidewalks at each end and on the principal sidestreets. You always walked on the wooden sidewalks with your eyes down looking through the cracks in the hope of catching the glint

of a lost coin. There were still almost as many horse-drawn conveyances around as there were cars and trucks, and even more in winter when most cars were put on blocks.

I learned early on that nearly everything exciting or important happened on Main Street, including the big fires that broke out from time to time, usually in winter. Two that I remember vividly were the spectacular fires that devastated the old Flour Mill and J.R. Friesen's garage. And I can just remember the fire that destroyed the Schwarz Bros. store at the corner of Main and Reimer, a site later filled by the two-story building that housed McBurney's Drug Store and Dr. Whetter's office in my time.

When I started kindergarten in 1931, I was allowed to walk down Main Street, usually with a friend or two, to Tante Anna's little shed of a kindergarten situated behind what was then called simply the Printery. Sometimes we had "lunch" pennies to spend and would look eagerly through the window of the Central Store (where Steinbach Place stands today) to see if jolly Mr. Benjamin Janz was behind the candy counter. Every kid in town knew that Mr. Janz, beaming with pleasure, would give you a nickel's worth of jelly beans or mixed candy for your kindergarten penny. When he wasn't there our greedy little hearts sank as we proceeded to the Vogt Bros. store down the street and settled for a paper tube of coloured popcorn.

I loved kindergarten and dynamic Tante Anna from the first day. Her sprightly, fluent High Ger-



Elmer (Al) Reimer in his little garden behind his parent's house in Steinbach. Al Reimer as a young 4-er, ca. 1935. All photographs for this article are from the private collection of the author Al Reimer.

man made my head spin, but she taught us songs and games with such infectious warmth that we understood her perfectly even when her elegant German danced beyond our comprehension.

When I started school two years later, I was again lucky to come under the inspired tutelage of Miss Mary Kornelsen. I'm proud of having been in the very first class this brilliant teacher taught in Steinbach in a career that was to make her one of the most admired teachers in the province. Nervously excited that first morning, I was mesmerized by the dramatic clicks of Miss Kornelsen's tiny spiked heels as she strode briskly around the classroom. And I was so enraptured by her musical "English" voice that it became for me then and there--and for a long time afterwards--a touchstone for the great "English" world of learning and culture that lay so mysteriously beyond my ken.

Church was another matter altogether. It was a tedium stretching unbroken across every Sunday morning of the year. We belonged to the conserva-

tive Kleine Gemeinde (now the EMC) church on Main (then usually referred to as the South-end Church). My father Peter J.B. Reimer was the Sunday school superintendent and choir leader. Sunday school began at 9:30, followed by the regular service, which consisted of one long German sermon and two shorter ones and usually lasted until 12:30 p.m. and often well beyond that.

There were also interminable German hymns led by a Faasenja who called out the line just before the congregation got to it. The Faasenja droned nasally from one line to another without a break while the congregation drew a much-needed breath. There were no musical instruments and very little, if any, part singing.

In fact, of the four churches in town in the thirties, only the EMB church (then known as the Bruderthaler church) allowed musical instruments, I believe. It was regarded as the fashionable church which had all the leading businessmen and their families as members, with the prominent exception of the C.T. Loewen family. The other churches were the Holdemann church on north Main and the small MB church not far from the EMB. Everybody in town attended the EMB Jugendverein on Sunday evenings and there you could hear everything from barbershop quartet gospel singing to the playing of handsaws with fiddle bows.

The EMB was also the first church to hold revival meetings, I think, and I can still hear the incredible vocal thunder of Rev. George Schultz from Saskatchewan. When he let out his full decibels I was terrified and already saw the skies opening up for the Last Judgement. These meetings were the forerunners to the much larger revival campaigns



Elisabeth Kehler Reimer and son Elmer, in front of their house in Steinbach, 1928. Her biography written by son Al was published in Preservings, No. 10, Part Two, pages 28-30. Al was born May 30, 1927.



Seeing King George IV and the Queen in Winnipeg, Polo Park, 1939. The photo shows a group of locals gathered under the Steinbach banner. Does anyone recognize anyone? Al Reimer's father, Rev. P.J.B. Reimer, Steinbach, is visible in the middle, somewhat to the right.



A panorama of Steinbach, taken from the P. B. Reimer & Sons feed mill on First Street (originally Mill Street) built in the early 1940s. The feedmill later burned down. Visible in the upper left hand corner is the Kornelsen School and the massive H. W. Reimer house still stands proudly on Main Street, and, in the rear, is visible the rudimentary outline of modern-day Hanover Street and Townline Road (Loewen Blvd.). The Martin M. Penner house stands at the corner of First St. and Lumber; behind it the Steel sisters' home - Marge and Ida, and behind it, just off the photo, the original M.B. church (originally the Kleine Gemeinde church school from 1913-1919, see Pres., No. 9, Part One, page 4). The Steinbach Light and Power Plant is just to the east of the M.M. Penner home, and next east on Lumber is the warehouse of Steinbach Lumber Yards. The residence at the bottom right side belongs to Peter Funk.

of the forties.

Much has been said and written about the lack of entertainment and sporting facilities in Steinbach in the old days, but we boys, summer or winter, never lacked for entertainment or things to do. In summer no self-respecting boy wore shoes or went anywhere without his Stiaraut, a metal hoop or small wagon wheel propelled with a T-shaped stick.

It's true we had no regular swimming pool and had to make do with substitutes like the swollen creek in late spring or the mud-bottomed ice-making pool behind C.T. Loewen's factory. As we got older we also had a kind soul like Mr. P.A. Vogt, who would take a whole truckload of us boys to the sand pit or to River Bend Park at St. Anne on Sunday afternoons.

Our most exciting summer game was playing war with homemade rubberband guns, using

rubberbands cut from inner tubes. That boys growing up in the nonviolent, anti-military atmosphere of a Mennonite town should be so fanatically addicted to war games is one of those puzzles that can't be explained, I suppose. The highlights of this toy warfare came on Sunday afternoons when dozens of heavily armed boys of all ages from all over town gathered, at the invitation of the Vogt twins John and Ewald (Ed), at the rickety old livery barn behind the Vogt Bros. store off Main. Its wonderfully dilapidated condition made it an ideal "fort" to defend or attack. If you could survive an afternoon of warfare on the winning side you were an instant hero, especially if you were one of the younger guys. Ironically, within a year or two some of these older mock-soldiers would be real soldiers in a real war.

The big summer event was Sports Day on July

1st. Everybody in town and surrounding district flocked to that. There were always games of chance, a big baseball tournament, and concession tents where you could buy refreshments if you were lucky enough to come with anything between a nickel and a quarter. Only a day of rain could spoil Sports Day and you prayed for weeks before that no rain would fall. For years there was also the so-called Air Tour with a dozen or more light planes flying in for the day, giving rides (which we boys could never afford) and doing daring stunts. Our hero was Nick Czun, a parachute artist who thrilled us year after year with his low-level jumps. One year in the mid-thirties a plane from Winnipeg crashed trying to do a loop-the-loop too close to the ground. Miraculously, the pilot walked away from his badly damaged craft with only minor injuries.

A few years later Nick Czun brought a balloon



Hanover Street, early 1940s. The residence to the left belonged to Art and Leona Rempel. The two-story house, two doors down, is that of chiropractor Cornelius Penner. View from the corner of Elm Street and Hanover Street, looking southeast.



1925. The Klaas J. B. Reimer farm, Al's uncle, NW36-6-6E. The farm was established by Al's grandfather Johann R. Reimer in 1916, the last of the Steinbach pioneers to relocate their farms "onto the land". His widow, the midwife Aganetha Barkman Reimer, lived here until her death in 1938 after which the property was acquired by son Klaas. Klaas also served as a Councillor when the Town of Steinbach was incorporated in 1947.

which suddenly exploded in a tremendous whooshing fireball while he was inflating it with hydrogen gas. Many of us were no more than a hundred yards away and we all stampeded in terror. No one was killed, but one man was severely burned. Our three swashbuckling local pilots Frank Sawatzky, Bill Wiebe and Ed Friesen were also part of the Air Tour with their home-built little Pietenpol and the larger Corben Jr. For us boys Frank Sawatzky, in his black leather flying jacket and goggled helmet, sporting a natty Clark Gable moustache, was by far the most glamorous figure in town.

In winter our lives focused on hockey--street hockey on shoes, often with a "roadapple" or sponge ball as puck and twenty players per side. We also had marathon Saturday afternoon games on skates on the creek. And, of course, there was the open-air rink (where the curling rink is now) with its high outside walls of warped, grey boards and a run-down rink shack at one end. When your toes froze, as they frequently did, you wobbled into the shack, tore off your skates and held your stockinged feet to the red-hot oil drum stove until they smoked. Then you dashed outside for a handful of snow and rubbed your bare toes until they came stingingly alive and started to swell. And then you screeched and howled in agony until the next period started. If your toes weren't too badly swollen you put your skates back on and went out to play. If they were, you squeezed on your moccasins and limped home.

I loved to watch the senior Huskies play, with smoothies like George Loewen and Levi Barkman up front and stalwarts like L.A. Barkman and Alex Tarasenko on defense, backed up by steady John Stark in goal. Getting to the games was a real problem. My father disapproved of my going to these worldly games and even if, after much pleading, he gave me permission, I had to come home after the first period. Later I was allowed to see two periods but had to be home by ten. Even then he seldom gave me the money to buy a ticket and I had to find other ways to see my heroes. The best way was to scale the wall of the rink at the back end, but that was risky. If you were caught you were forced to pay or got roughly chucked out. Another was to climb the big oak tree behind the south wall and watch the game from

there. That was a little less risky but you were exposed up there and there were usually rink guards on patrol.

One night one of these cunning brutes found the ultimate weapon to get us three or four illegal fans off our perches. Engrossed in the game we didn't notice him sneaking up with the big flooding hose until a blast of icy water hit us. Numb with shock, we slipped and slithered down the tree and lurched into the darkness. I headed for the creek and home but within minutes my pants were frozen stiff as stovepipes. Trying to get through the barbed wire fence that ran along the back of the rink I got badly hung up and might have frozen helplessly to death if an older boy hadn't come along and released me. The good thing that came out of that dreadful experience was that from then on my father let me go to games only as a paying fan.

And then there was Christmas. For weeks you pored over the Eaton's catalogue trying to decide what you wanted most and could reasonably expect to get. At noon recess and after four you haunted H.W. Reimer's store, which every year set up a tantalizing toy display just inside the broad front entrance. This little fortress of toys and games was zealously guarded by "Taunte Auntje" the somewhat eccentric spinster sister of "Uncle" Henry, Ben and Klaas, the three brothers who ran this emporium. Auntje took no nonsense from awe-struck children who came to ogle this cornucopia of Santa's wares. She allowed no stealthy touching, and no demonstrations of anything unless she deemed you a potential customer. And then at last

Christmas Eve was there and you would receive your first present at the church programme in the form of a large brown Tut filled with nuts, candy and an apple or orange. Then you rushed home with eager anticipation to set up your Schiew or bowl on the kitchen table or under the tree.

By the late thirties Steinbach had close to fifty business places, including six stores, two lumberyards, two machine shops, two truck transfer companies, four car dealers, three barber shops, two cafes, a telephone exchange, a light and power plant, a drug store, a hospital with two or three doctors, a bank, a funeral parlour, two body shops, a creamery, a clothing store, a newspaper and printery and several other businesses.

It also had five churches serving six Mennonite denominations, two schools, a bus service with snowplane service in winter, and a local police constable with an unerring nose for finding illicit stills. Steinbach even boasted two "suburbs"--Hungawaadie south-east of town, where mainly poor people lived then, and Nie Moscow at the south-west end, where the so-called Russlenda lived and grew early commercial potatoes.

There were a number of successful family-run businesses, but the most prominent business family were the five Loewen brothers, who together came close to forming a sort of business monopoly in town. Steinbachers liked to say--with pride or with envy, as the case might be--that C.T., P.T., I.T., J.T., and A.T., with their five different business establishments, could take care of you almost from the cradle to the grave. When you got ready to build your first house you went to C.T. Loewen's lumberyard for the materials. If you couldn't afford a new home you could always buy a used home or shack somewhere and have J.T.'s moving truck take it to your lot. When you got ready to buy your first car what better place than P.T.'s Chev dealership. If you banged up a fender or worse you took your car to I.T.'s body shop for repairs. Finally, when your time came to depart this vale of tears for a better world, A.T.'s funeral parlour would fix you up and take you to your final resting place. And where were A.T.'s caskets made, at least in the early years? You guessed it. At brother C.T.'s lumberyard. And so the five-spoked Loewen business wheel came full circle.

The quiet thirties and my sunny boyhood ended together with the coming of the War, and gradually the world seemed to become a darker, harsher place. Having my adolescent years coincide with the war years was not the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. I was too young to get into the War but old enough to be deeply affected by it. It's difficult to describe the atmosphere of a world at war to people who haven't experienced it. And don't forget that for the first three or four years things looked bleak for our side. Hitler looked pretty unbeatable for a while. At first the War seemed far away. For me it became a vivid reality one Sunday morning in 1940 when local boy Steve Friesen, a raw recruit at the time, came to our South-end church in full uniform complete with a wicked-looking dress



The house where Al Reimer grew up at the corner of Reimer Ave, Hanover Street and modern-day Hospital Street, circa 1940. The house was built for P. J. B. Reimer in 1927.



Interior photo of the Johann R. Reimer house on NW36-6-6E, later the Klaas J. B. Reimer property.

sword dangling at his side. You can imagine what kind of impression that made on meek and mild Kleingemeinders.

As the War progressed, more and more Steinbach and district boys joined the armed services. By my own count, by the time the War ended in 1945, well over a hundred local men (and a few women) had served in the military, including six brothers of the Jac. D. Barkman family on Main Street, and five brothers from the A. A. Reimer family. Four native sons had lost their lives in action or on active service. On weekends Main Street was usually swarming with uniformed men home on leave. The whole atmosphere of the town changed as these young military men, speaking English for the most part, brought their brash new freedom and confidence and changing views in from the outside world, and made it clear they were no longer willing to conform to Mennonite ways and views.

On Saturday nights the pub at the Tourist Hotel was always packed, with these young soldiers and airmen disdaining the local practice of trying to sneak in without being observed by the town respectables. They marched into the pub boldly and emerged at closing time full of beer to swagger noisily to the J.H.R. Cafe or to Pete's Inn or to the Fruit Store. In winter they attended Huskies' games and let off steam by cheering for them and by heckling fans of the visiting team.

The War changed Steinbach in more positive ways as well. With the Depression over, local businessmen, always an enterprising lot, began taking advantage of new and bigger opportunities. Expansion and entrepreneurship were in the air as the opportunities in the outside world began to beckon. C.T. Loewen's bee supplies and sash and door products were finding markets all over Western Canada.



Bethesda Hospital as it looked after completion in 1937. View to the northeast. Building supervisor was Cornelius P. Reimer (1880-1946), Clearsprings.

After the P.B. Reimer store burned down in '43, Frank Reimer, soon to be nicknamed "Carload" Frank for his innovative marketing, took over the family business and developed the techniques that he and son Don would parlay into the fantastically successful Reimer Express Lines. The Penner brothers, Abe and John, were already in high gear as car dealers and no longer laughed at in local business circles as naive dreamers from the farm. They were in the process of becoming the legendary A.D. and J.D., with initials being regarded in Steinbach as badges of business success. Other businesses were expanding as well.

A new business which became a local institution was Pete's Inn, which began as a little two-booth shack next to Reimer's Bargain Store on Main in 1940. When the new Pete's Inn opened nearby a few years later it became our after-school hangout. Genial Pete Kehler was our friend and father-confessor who would listen patiently to our complaints and problems and then, his eyes snapping roguishly, would entertain us with a non-stop flow of Low German jokes and stories that would always put us in a good mood.

Usually his brother George was there as well and he was equally good opp Plautdietsch. They always began by saying, "Junges, etj woa junt mol waut fetale," and then they would take turns in a kind of integrated repertoire of hilarious yarns and anecdotes.

Another favourite hangout for us was George Goossen's barber shop and three-table pool room, which drew us like a magnet. In those days you had to be eighteen to play pool, but we high school boys

ignored that rule whenever possible. Most of the time "Uncle" George, as we called him behind his back, didn't bother us even though he knew we were underage. But Goossen was a binge drinker and every couple of weeks at least he went on a one or two-day bender and then things could get ugly as he went into sudden rages and tried to throw us bodily out of his poolroom amidst loud curses and threats. Several times, I remember, he chased me around the pool tables hollering terrible threats before I could slip out to safety. Once or twice he cornered me in the back and started whacking me with a pool cue before I made my escape. When his binge was over Uncle George was his usual calm, friendly self and seemed to have no recollection of the hard time he had given us the day before.

When he was in his cups he was also a pretty erratic barber. Once, when I was eleven or twelve, my mother sent me for a haircut at what proved to be the wrong time. Looking balefully at me, Uncle George ran his electric razor right down the middle of my skull, giving me a kind of reverse Iroquois cut. My mother took an angry look at my mutilated scalp and sent me back next day for a complete and very short brushcut.

We certainly had our share of colourful, odd, eccentric characters in Steinbach in those days. "Uncle" Henry Reimer, the oldest of the H.W. brothers, was one of the more prominent ones. He was a bachelor who lived in the big Reimer house across Main from the Reimer store. He was a business visionary whose brain teemed with schemes and plans and innovations. One I recall was his scheme to build a skywalk across Main from his house to his store. Later he became a dietary health nut and when he went to Pete's Inn for lunch or dinner he would always take a loaf of his special whole wheat bread for the kitchen to make his sandwich with.

Another interesting bachelor who was as shy as Uncle Henry was brash was Isaac Plett the inventor. He had a machine shop at the south end of Main where he lived and puttered around inventing things. His father had been an inventor as well, as was one of his brothers. In 1937 Isaac invented a machine for imbedding the wire in the wax frames used in the honey indus-



1943. Steinbach Collegiate Institute on Second Street, where Al Reimer attended.

try. The machine enabled C.T. Loewen's to stay competitive in the field for decades. How much Isaac benefited from his inventions I don't know, but he always had the slightly bewildered look of a man who isn't sure what the world expects of him next.

One of my favourite characters was Dirk Harder, known to locals as "Haudasch Dertj." Dertj was a little simple but very friendly and fancied himself as a stylish dresser. With his crooked smile and slicked-back yellow hair (which I seem to recall he dyed red or black on occasion) he had the ingratiating but wary look of a stray dog trying to curry favour. Dertj never had what you could call a regular job, but you could usually find him around the Tourist Hotel where he polished shoes for travellers and did odd jobs around the pub.

What Dertj lived for, though, was dressing up, usually like someone from the twenties, including spats, as I recall. In summer he liked to dress all in white--white dress shirt with rolled up sleeves, stiff white cotton or canvas pants with a white belt and heavily polished white shoes. It was said that Dertj's mother, who looked and sounded like a Low German Ma Kettle, kept up a steady barrage of loud complaints at having to wash her son's summer whites so often. Dertj was a bachelor at that time (I wonder why almost all our colourful characters were bachelors?) but he did have the odd girlfriend--and I do mean odd--usually some rustic type from out of town, whom he would squire around with great pride on Saturday nights, take to the movies, maybe, and even buy her a banana split at the Fruit Store next to the hotel.

Another odd character (another bachelor) who always remained a bit of a mystery to me, and to most others, was John Isaac, "Isaake Hauns". He lived with his widowed mother up the street from us on Hanover. Hauns joined the Army and I believe saw action in Europe. In any case, he came back from military service with a stiff leg, or even an artificial one--I never knew exactly. His behaviour had always been a bit bizarre, but now he seemed a little mad. Every day he passed our place in a stiff-legged military march dressed in parts of his old Army uniform, while talking to himself angrily. We boys were intrigued by his behaviour but stayed well beyond his reach, afraid of what he might do if we teased or accosted him.

The most conspicuous and durable town character was Gumshoe Jake Reimer, who loafed his way through life without a care, it seemed, except pleasing his own simple tastes. His gap-toothed moon face cracked and lined like a relief map, Jake greeted the world with a carefree grin that always reminded me of a jack-o-lantern, without the lighted candle inside. His heavy body slack from idleness, Jake sat in the pub and the local cafes day after day, wearing his black rubber boots and smoking from his nickel pack of Turrett cigarettes, which never contained more than two or three roll-your-owns, as protection against moochers.

Gumshoe Jake had honed not-working to such a fine art that most people regarded his free, idle life



The Kleine Gemeinde church on Main Street after completion of remodelling in 1941. It was known locally as the "South End" church. According to a family book, C. P. Reimer was the building supervisor: (see Pres., No. 10, Part One, page 75 for photographs of the original building.

as a natural state, as a kind of special dispensation enabling him to saunter through life with the impunity of the village idiot in medieval times. Not that Jake was an idiot--far from it. And he certainly didn't regard himself as a bum, but liked to describe himself as "a non-taxpaying citizen." I believe he even owned a quarter section of stony land at one time. Jake had pronounced views on just about everything. When the new town hall opened, he was quoted in the *Carillon* as saying: "I was against the project when it started, but now that it's there I'm all for it."

When he was in a beer-mellow mood, Jake liked to turn serious and would urge us boys sitting

around the cafe to "grow up straight and don't let the old Adam get you by the tail, like me"--or words to that effect. "You boys," he would add, "you still have a chance. Grab it while you can." And we would laugh self-consciously, feeling a little sorry for the old guy, but also a little guilty for our own waywardness.

In fact, spiritual revival was very much in the air during those apocalyptic war years. The mass evangelical campaigns which were conducted periodically at the Tabernacle were as carefully planned and executed as any military assault in Europe. These often week-long events made the church

revival meetings, the street meetings on Main Saturday nights, and even the well-known evangelizing Dalzell family look pale by comparison. The Dalzells were an American family from south of the line who came to Steinbach regularly and conducted hot gospel sessions from the back of their truck with the whole family playing and singing and Father Dalzell doing most of the preaching. They became an institution in town during the late thirties and forties and were regarded with curiosity and affection by those who gathered to hear them, including those who occasionally scoffed or mildly heckled them.

Opened in 1942, the Tabernacle seated over a



The "Tabernacle" 1940s. Public and community events in Steinbach were held here for many years. The P. B. Reimer house is visible to the left. The Steinbach flour mill on Main Street is partially hidden behind the tabernacle.



Early 1940s, view toward the northeast down Reimer Ave. To the left is the Brüderthaler church and the Kornelsen School to the right. To the left of the church is the home of Erdmann Peters, uncle to the "hotel" Peters clan - Cliff, Jake and Pete. The two-story building visible to the right of the church houses the McBurneys' Drugstore and the offices of Drs. Hodgson and Wetter.

1000 people and was built in the shape of a hockey arena. I was by that time in my rebel-with-a-cause phase and attended the campaign meetings only because I was ordered to do so. Too stubborn to surrender to the altar calls, I quaked with fear and guilt over my own brazen resistance. One of the most traumatic of these campaigns was conducted by an American evangelist called Dr. Hyman Appleman, who made the end of the world so compelling that he scared me and a lot of other sinners, young and old, half to death.

But a few weeks later I felt vindicated for not capitulating to him when I read in *Time* magazine that this man had been charged in California with stealing campaign funds. But when I showed the item to my father he seemed less concerned with Dr. Appleman's crime than he was with what he saw as my growing scepticism. Looking back, I can't help thinking that the war hysteria helped to make these campaigns in the Tabernacle so sweepingly effective. There certainly was an edge-of-doom, end-of-the-world feeling that gripped many of us in that grim period of world war.

One wartime innovation which I welcomed but the town as a whole did not was the movie theatre built in 1940 at Main and Kroeker by a man everyone knew simply as Tarnopolski. How this man got away with his daring act is anyone's guess. By the time the churches woke up to this evil threat and got up a petition, the den of iniquity already stood there beckoning. I wasn't allowed to go as long as I was under parental control, but by the time I was in my mid-teens I would boldly take my girlfriend to the movies on Saturday nights. But getting in wasn't always so easy.

Patrolling the front entrance there was always, even on the coldest days in winter, a small, well-meaning but very militant group of Christian vigilantes trying to dissuade people from going in to this sinful place. These self-appointed do-gooders were mostly from our own Kleingemeinde church just down the street—one family in particular. If their pleas failed to prevent us from going in they would even resort to grabbing our arms and trying to restrain us physically. As for Tarnopolski, he committed suicide within a year of opening his theatre and many people in town were convinced it was a bad conscience that drove him to it. The theatre, however, remained in town for years even against strong organized opposition.

By that time I was having personal problems both at home and in school. I was far from being a juvenile delinquent, although in the Steinbach of that time a reluctance to conform branded you as one very quickly. But there's no denying I was headstrong and independent-minded and displayed more than a touch of arrogance towards my elders and betters. I was also an avid reader of serious books, which I found readily in my bookloving

father's extensive library at home, and which were changing my views on society and religion rapidly.

I didn't want to be a Mennonite and I was developing a disdainful attitude towards the rather strict church we belonged to. When I came down from my room for dinner, my mother, who never read anything but was very shrewd, would take a long look at me and say: "Jung du kjitjst aul wada soo diesta ute Uage. Last du aul wada schlaejchte Beatja?" "Son, you've got that dark look in your eyes again. Are you still reading those bad books?"



Steinbach high school boys at play: l.-r., Frank Klassen, Erich Vogt (at piano), Pete Barkman, Reg Heidman and Edgar Reimer (brother to Wes).



Parents' Day at Tanta Anna's kindergarten, ca. 1933-1934. Tanta Anna is seated on the chair to the left. The kindergarten was held in an old building but on a nice day, the classes were moved outside. Can any reader recognize any faces? The girl sitting in front facing the camera is Al's sister Louise. Seated in the center, facing the camera, is Rod Toews, son of A. P. Toews. Identification courtesy of Ernie P. Toews. See Pres., No. 8, Part One, pages 26-27, for an article in Anna Vogt: Kindergarten Pioneer.

And my educated schoolteacher father would say complacently: "Let the boy read, mother, it's good for him."

But I knew that from my parents' point of view my mother's assessment of what my reading was doing to me was more accurate than my Dad's. My reading was indeed moving me intellectually into an alien world away from things Mennonite.

At school I had constant disciplinary problems. I may have set a record by getting at least one spanking (and in those days they were real spankings) in every grade from I through VIII. I was scheduled to get one in Grade IX, too, but got a last-minute reprieve from Principal Zado, I suppose on the grounds that I was a lost cause anyway. But I got my comeuppance the following year when Mr. Zado expelled me ignominiously from Grade X about six weeks before the end of the school term. I had to repeat the grade and it cost me a year. It's one of my

few teenage experiences which still rankles a bit, although given the parameters of school discipline prevailing then, I'm sure it was regarded as just punishment, and it certainly had my father's full approval.

The end of the War came just before the end of my troubled adolescence. The war years had changed Steinbach from a cosy, puritanical, inward-looking Mennonite "Darp" to an enterprising town receptive to change and expansion, including a greater receptivity to non-Mennonite influences, especially in the economic sector. In 1946, that change in identity was formalized when Steinbach was officially incorporated as a town.

Personally, I was as ready for change and expansion by this time as the town was. I had grown up in the thirties as a happy-go-lucky Kehler, you might say, and grown "down" to become a headstrong and cocksure Reimer. Now I was ready to escape from what I considered the much too narrow and rigid confines of home, community and church.

I was to learn, however, that getting away and escaping completely are two very different things, and that wherever I went I would be compelled to take the baggage of my Steinbach past with me. It took me some years to realize that I had grown up with a heritage that was my most precious possession and that by denying that heritage I was damaging the very tap-root of my existence.

Nowadays I take great pride and a Kehler-like delight in my Steinbach past and have shaped and edited my memories of that past into a version I feel very comfortable with. And if my version doesn't always coincide with that of other Steinbachers of my generation, so be it. We all take different home movies of our past lives. As Haudasch Dertj used to say in his fractured English as he pranced down Main Street all in white on Saturday nights: "Okay, boys, I'm from here too. Whaddaya say we overtake the

town."

Well, I'm from here too, but I'm content to "overtake" my town in memory only.

Further Reading:

Henry Schapansky, "The Bergthaler Käblers/Kehlers," in *Pres.*, No. 10, Part One, pages 66-69.

Al Reimer, "Johann R. Reimer (1848-1918): Steinbach Pioneer," in *Pres.*, No. 9, Part Two, pages 39-43.

Harvey Kroeker, "Aganetha Barkman Reimer 1863-1938," in *Pres.*, No. 6, pages 23-24.

Katharina Bergen, "Rev. Peter S. Kehler (1896-1968), Bergthal," in *Pres.*, No. 17, pages 108-113.

Al Reimer, "Jakob 'Berliner' Kehler (1863-1923), Ebenfeld," in *Pres.*, No. 14, pages 110-114.

Glenn Kehler, "De Fiey Dokta: Johann Schultz Kehler (1894-1962)," in *Pres.*, No. 14, pages 87-88.