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Benjamin Unruh, Nazism and MCC

In 1919, Benjamin Unruh was one of four Study Commissioners sent by Russian Mennonites to the United States and Canada to tell the horrors of revolution, anarchy and impending famine, and to request immediate aid. This stimulated the formation of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). MCC's intersections with Unruh during the National Socialist period are less known.¹

Most famously, Unruh and MCC's Harold S. Bender worked closely between 1929 and 1931 to resettle some 3,885 Mennonites rescued from Moscow. In fall 1929, more than 9,000 Mennonites and 4,000 other ethnic German farmers from across the Soviet Union fled to Moscow in a last desperate attempt to emigrate. Thousands more were turned back, and those in Moscow were threatened with heavy repression. Unruh convinced the German government in Berlin to bring out thousands from the Soviet Union to transit camps in Germany with assurances of significant repayment from churches in Canada and the United States. MCC's response was sluggish and confused about the crisis' scope and urgency. As the situation in Moscow took on "an ominous character,"² Unruh was exasperated with MCC secretary-treasurer Levi Mumaw. "I am waiting on pins and needles . . . The whole world is now looking to our church in Europe and America for what they will do." Only after the Reich Cabinet approved 6 million RM (US\$1,428,000) to transfer and temporarily house the Mennonites in Germany before resettlement abroad,³ MCC executives met and telegraphed Unruh that they had taken steps



Displaced Mennonites about to leave the MCC-administered camp in Gronau, Germany, on their way to Canada. Ca. 1948. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

¹ See Benjamin W. Goossen's thorough study, "Taube und Hakenkreuz: Verhandlungen zwischen der NS-Regierung und dem MCC in Bezug auf die lateinamerikanischen Mennoniten," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 18 (2017): 133–160. On Nazi Germany's view of Mennonites—transmitted largely by Unruh—see also idem, "'A Small World Power': How the Nazi Regime Viewed Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 92/2 (2018): 173–206.

² "11. November 1929, Drahtbericht, Twardowski an das Auswärtige Amt," in Reichskanzlei, "Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland," November 1929–Februar 1935, Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, R 43-I/141, Bundesarchiv, Germany (hereafter BArch).

³ On costs, cf. Curtius to the State Secretary of the Chancellery, November 6, 1929, in *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik*, Serie B, XIII, 227, no. 104; 228 n.8; budget proposal, November 13, 1929, Reichskanzlei, "Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland," 135, no. 66. All dollar figures throughout are in US\$.

 **“Unruh fanned pro-Nazi sparks with articles in Mennonite papers, especially in Canada.”**

“to mobilize relief forces of Mennonites throughout the country and are confident of full support.”⁴ Unruh gave a verbal commitment to the German government as “European representative” of MCC and the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC). The organizations were to collect funds and reimburse the Reich by 1940, with interest payments starting in 1935.⁵ MCC chair P. C. Hiebert recognized that “Unruh has been a veritable Hercules in the service he thus rendered.”⁶ Executive member Maxwell Kratz signed the agreement on June 2, 1930, noting MCC was unincorporated and its resources “dependent altogether on relief contributions.”⁷ This agreement would tie MCC to Unruh long-term.

Unruh’s growing German nationalism was reinforced by events in 1930, including September elections with Nazi gains. Before Adolf Hitler attained power in 1933, Unruh was a financial supporter of the Nazi Party, the German National People’s Party and a Patron Member of the Nazi *Schutzstaffel*, or SS.⁸ This new government was willing to use its diplomatic influence for aid to Soviet Germans and to embarrass Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.⁹ Hitler donated RM 1,000 for the aid organization “Brothers in Need” in July 1933—among his first official acts.¹⁰ It was chaired by the German Red Cross with Unruh on its board. In one year, CMBC funneled

⁴ Maxwell Kratz to B. H. Unruh, November 27, 1929, IX-01, box 4, file 3-0022, MCC U.S. archives, Akron, Pennsylvania (hereafter MCCA); also Levi Mumaw to C.F. Klassen, November 26, 1929, IX-01-01, box 10, file 210038, MCCA.

⁵ Cf. “Verpflichtungserklärung,” no date, IX-01-03, box 7, file 7-0011, MCCA.

⁶ P.C. Hiebert to Maxwell Kratz, December 7, 1929, letter, IX-02, box 4, file 2-0001, MCCA.

⁷ Maxwell Kratz to John Leibl, German Vice-Consul, Pittsburgh, June 2, 1930, IX-01-01, box 10, file 190004, MCCA.

⁸ Cf. B. H. Unruh, “Fragebogen zur Bearbeitung des Aufnahmeantrages für die Reichsschriftumskammer,” October 7, 1937, no. 10 and no. 12, MS 416, Mennonite Library and Archive, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas (hereafter MLA). Unruh also highlights his SS patron membership in a 1940 letter to a government official; cf. Benjamin H. Unruh to SS-Hauptsturmführer Walther Kolrep, January 30, 1940, 2, letter, MS 295, folder 13, MLA. On the responsibilities of this membership, cf. Peter Letkemann, “Nachwort,” in *Fügungen und Führungen: Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, 1881–1959*, ed. Heinrich B. Unruh, 361–447 (Detmold: Verein zur Erforschung und Pflege des Russlanddeutschen Mennonitentums, 2009), 392f.

⁹ Cf. recommendation by Herbert von Dirksen, German Ambassador Moscow, to German Foreign Ministry, telegram, July 3, 1933, telegram, “Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland,” R 43-I/141, 188, BArch.

¹⁰ German Red Cross President to the Reich Chancellor (Hitler), July 15, 1933, “Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland,” R 43-I/141, 192, from BArch. Cf. e.g., Ewald Ammende, “Eine Pflicht der Nation. Zur Tragödie des Rußlanddeutchtums,” *Rigaschen Rundschau*, Erste Beilage, no. 54 (8 March 1934); cf. “Der Untergang der deutschen Bauern in Rußland”—recommended in the Nazi government press directives for June 30, 1933 (Gabriele Toepser-Ziegert, ed., *N-S Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit I*, 1933 [New York: Saur, 1984], 45).



MCC relief worker M.C. Lehman (left), accompanied by Columba F. Murray, Commission for Polish Relief, visited Polish Relief Kitchen No. 15 at 37 Bruholowska Street, Warsaw, around 1939. Two thousand seven hundred portions of soup were issued daily. Each portion amounted to 150–160 calories and contained no fats or meat. Lehman administered MCC assistance through the German and Polish Red Cross. (MCC photo)

\$21,377 through Unruh for famine relief.¹¹ Notably, aid sent through Germany “in the name of Christ” was branded as “Hitler-Help” by Soviet police.¹²

After Canada rejected most Mennonite refugees, Brazil was Berlin’s preferred destination for these Mennonites. Instead, MCC chose a costly investment in Paraguay for, unlike Brazil, it would not require military service from the Mennonite immigrants. Bender envisioned a “Mennonite state” where they could live out their “German culture” undisturbed.¹³ “We have assumed full responsibility for the welfare of the colony not only with respect to the German government, but in the eyes of the entire Mennonite world,” Bender reported.¹⁴ MCC’s \$100,000 financial investment was huge. The debt to Germany, however, was double¹⁵ and its interest in these “brothers in need” strong. German cultural influences were beyond what Bender imagined in 1931. “Something is grievously at fault in the colony,” he wrote. A “letter from a certain Kliewer . . . a settler in the colony” was

¹¹ David Töws, “Immigration und Nothilfe,” *Bericht über die zweiunddreißigste Allgemeine Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada, 1934*, ed. Johann G. Rempel, 65–75 (Rosthern, SK: D. H. Epp, 1934), 73.

¹² “No. 87, Einfluss der Nationalistischen Organisationen und der deutschen Konsulate” (22 May 1934), in *Die Mennoniten in der Ukraine und im Gebiet Orenburg: Dokumente aus Archiven in Kiev und Orenburg*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Hildebrandt (Göttingen: Göttinger Arbeitskreis, 2006), 69f.; 73. Cf. Liesel Quiring-Unruh, “‘Brüder in Not.’ Vor fünfzig Jahren: Wie Deutschland den Rußlanddeutschen zu helfen versuchte,” *Mennonitische Blätter* 6/17 (July 1979): 105.

¹³ H. S. Bender, “Die Einwanderung nach Paraguay,” in *Bericht über die Mennonitische Welt-Hilfs-Konferenz vom 31. August bis 3. September 1930 in Danzig*, ed. D. Christian Neff (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1930), 121f.


¹⁴ H.S. Bender to MCC Executive, Report IV: Final and Summary Report, November 8, 1930, 3, IX-01-01, box 11, file 6, MCCA.

¹⁵ B. H. Unruh, “Verzweifelte Selbsthilfe,” in Walter Quiring, *Rußlanddeutsche suchen eine Heimat. Die deutsche Einwanderung in den paraguayischen Chaco* (Karlsruhe: Schneider, 1938), 113.

published with an attack on MCC's representative, Bishop Tobias Hershey, claiming he "was of Jewish extraction."¹⁶

If MCC was responsible for the establishment of the Fernheim colony, Unruh was its mentor and connection to the "motherland." The colonist experience of Germany was "profound," and many "captured impressions of the National Socialist struggle which they took overseas."¹⁷ Unruh helped the Mennonite colonists to Paraguay navigate their way as Mennonites and Germans, including a Christian recommendation of the "Heil Hitler" greeting.¹⁸ "Just as we have held ourselves pure from foreign influences in Russia," Unruh wrote to the Fernheim colonists, "so also we want to confess faithfully and openly . . . the Germanness of the Third *Reich*, with words and deeds."¹⁹ While a few opposed the movement, Unruh stood them down. "We stand one hundred percent with Adolf Hitler in his God-given calling to lead Germany out of chaos and thus also to support and protect Europe and the world against Bolshevik ruin. One must be childish if one does not see this!"²⁰

While this coaching troubled MCC, it was slow to confront. Unruh fanned pro-Nazi sparks with articles in Mennonite papers, especially in Canada. Unruh reminded readers that Christians are always situated in a *Volk*, and that each *Volk* has its unique divine mission. "Being true to God implies being true to one's *Volk*, which in turn requires faithfulness to the nation," as Frank Epp summarized Unruh's articles.²¹ MCC was exasperated that Unruh also recommended these "as the policy for Fernheim."²² By 1935 Bender's mentor John Horsch gave up on Unruh—"such a staunch friend of

 **Unruh's 'exceptionally warm' audience with the Reichsführer-SS, Heinrich Himmler, over the New Year's transition from 1942 to 1943 confirmed Unruh's highest hopes [for Mennonite resettlement] in areas conquered by Germany.'**

¹⁶ H.S. Bender to MCC Executive, June 15, 1931; Tobias Hershey to Levi Mumaw, Harold Bender and Orie Miller, March 24, 1931, confidential report; "Official Report of Investigation Made in the Russian Colony of the Paraguayan Chaco," March 1931, IX-03-1, box 1, file 4, MCCA. Cf. also "Nachrichten aus Kolonie Fernheim," *Menno-Blatt* 2, no. 3 (March 1931), 4.

¹⁷ B. H. Unruh to Major Reitzenstein, 29 January 1937, 5, letter, MS 416, Potsdam microfilm selections, MLA (copy from Bundesarchiv Potsdam).

¹⁸ B. H. Unruh, December 8, 1934, extracted in B. H. Unruh to Major Reitzenstein, January 29, 1937, 6f., letter, from BArch-Potsdam, copy in MS 416, MLA.

¹⁹ Cited in Jakob Warkentin, "Wilhelmy, Herbert," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, online https://www.mennonitica.org/lexikon/?W:Wilhelmy%2C_Herbert.

²⁰ B. H. Unruh to J. Siemens, January 4, 1936, letter, from MS 416, MLA.

²¹ Frank H. Epp, "An Analysis of Germanism and National Socialism in the Immigrant Newspaper of a Canadian Minority Group, the Mennonites, in the 1930s," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1965, 227, 228, 229.

²² H.S. Bender to Orie O. Miller, May 16, 1944, 2, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana (hereafter GC-A).

²³ John Horsch to Harold S. Bender, October 12, 1935, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 6, folder 2 (John Horsch, 1935–1938), GC-A.



Heinrich Himmler (front row, third from right), architect of the Holocaust and the second most powerful man in the Third Reich during World War II, visited the Molotschna Mennonite colony in Soviet Ukraine—which Nazi occupiers renamed “Halbstadt” to sound more Germanic—between October 31 and November 1, 1942. Himmler took a special interest in the Molotschna colony even before he visited it in person; he micromanaged aspects of daily life in the colony—especially the formation of a local *Waffen-SS* regiment composed predominantly of Mennonites—through letters to his subordinates from the spring of 1942 through the colony’s westward evacuation in late 1943. (Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada)

Hitler;”²³ and again in 1936: “He is out and out for Hitler.”²⁴ In 1938 Bender and retired Bluffton College president Samuel Mosiman both asked if Unruh was an “agent of Berlin.” Unruh connected their opposition to the influence of American exceptionalism, Masonic lodges and the “Jewish” press.²⁵

In 1940, Bender met Unruh and made clear that MCC “did not endorse his policies” and “did not wish his line to be followed in Fernheim.” Later Bender felt Unruh had “cleverly exploited” this meeting for his Paraguayan correspondence, giving “the impression that the MCC is supporting Unruh in his [Nazi] attitudes.”²⁶ Only in 1944 when MCC was interrogated by U.S. federal investigators did they see their mistake: “Our failure to repudiate Unruh resulted in a magnification of his influence.”²⁷ Similarly, P.C. Hiebert conceded that Unruh “wholeheartedly supported the Nazi movement,” and if MCC “erred anywhere it was in letting some support get to him when we already knew how he stood.”²⁸

²⁴ John Horsch to Harold S. Bender, November 25, 1936, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 6, folder 2 (John Horsch, 1935–1938), GC-A.

²⁵ B. H. Unruh to David Toews, September 14, 1938, 3, letter, CMBC Records, vol. 1315, B. H. Unruh Collection, 1936–1938, Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg (hereafter MHA).

²⁶ Cf. H. S. Bender, “Report of a visit to Mennonite Relief Work in Europe, August 1940,” HM1-278, box 52, folder 17, GC-A; also H. S. Bender to Orie Miller, 16 May 1944, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, GC-A. On Bender’s Visit to Europe in 1940, cf. Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1887–1962* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 289f.

²⁷ H. S. Bender to Orie Miller, 16 May 1944, 2, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, GC-A.

²⁸ P. C. Hiebert to Orie Miller [?], May 2, 1944, letter, excerpted in Office of Chief Naval Operation, Navy Department, Intelligence Division, “Intelligence Report,” Re: Paraguay—Political Forces—People—Foreign Infiltration—Foreign Groups [interrogation of Orie O. Miller], August 7, 1944, 4, FBI reference: 100-57384-9; copy in MS 416, folder “Paraguay,” MLA.

Pictured, from left, are members of the Study Commission (*Studienkommission*) who traveled to the United States in 1920 to seek material assistance in the face of famine and to explore immigration options for Mennonites in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine): A.A. Friesen, John J. Esau, Benjamin H. Unruh and K.H. Warkentin. (MCC photo)



Unruh lived off a small stipend which fluctuated over the years based on German, Dutch, Canadian and U.S. Mennonite support. In letters to leaders across his network, Unruh complained about these financial arrangements. To David Toews, CMBC chair, he wrote: “You blame Bender and Bender blames you. What should I do?”²⁹ At the 1936 Mennonite World Conference an arrangement was struck, with MCC contributing half of Unruh’s stipend. This agreement never held, and MCC payments were late or partial.³⁰ Unruh experienced MCC’s Orie Miller as a “hard-nosed American businessman,”³¹ and warned that “Berlin authorities will not understand” if Mennonites did not support his office.³² The “Mennonite method” is to “squeeze the lemon and then throw it away,”³³ and so he pleaded with Miller to protect his self-respect: “This is important not only personally, but also materially.”³⁴

MCC continued to benefit from Unruh even as MCC leaders grew more concerned about Unruh’s unapologetic Nazism. In 1939, MCC and Unruh spoke in unison against agitation in Paraguay for a “return” to Germany.³⁵ Unruh successfully petitioned the Nazi state for debt forgiveness (eventually its entirety), interest reductions and cultural support.³⁶

²⁹ B. H. Unruh to David Toews, August 7, 1935, letter, vol. 1315, file 890, MHA.

³⁰ John D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and its Service 1920–1951* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1952), 341; 355n.

³¹ B. H. Unruh to David Toews, September 14, 1938, 2, letter, CMBC Records, vol. 1315, B. H. Unruh Collection, 1936–1938, file 889, MHA.

³² B. H. Unruh to O. Miller, July 29, 1938, 2, letter, MCC CPS and other Correspondence, 1931–39, file 1, MCCA.

³³ B. H. Unruh to David Toews, September 14, 1938, 5, letter, CMBC Records, vol. 1315, B. H. Unruh Collection, 1936–1938, file 889, MHA.

³⁴ B. H. Unruh to Orie Miller, May 24, 1940, letter, Mennonite Central Committee CPS and other Correspondence 1940–45, file 2, MCCA.

³⁵ Cf. Orie O. Miller to Ernst Kundt, August 1, 1939, letter, and B. H. Unruh to Orie O. Miller and H. S. Bender, 18 July 1939, letter, from Mennonite Central Committee and other Corr 1931–39, file 1, MCCA.

³⁶ B. H. Unruh to the Reich Ministry of Interior (Finance), January 31, 1940, R 2/11822, vol. 2, Reichsfinanzministerium, 1931–1942, BArch.

With Germany's invasion of Poland, everything changed. Hitler's resettlement plan by race would see ethnic Germans resettled into annexed Poland (Warthegau). "With certainty" this world-historical event would include "60,000 to 80,000 Mennonites" from Russia, Unruh claimed.³⁷ The German government's Office of Racial Policy anticipated larger numbers of ethnic Germans—"primarily Mennonites"—from Paraguay to return as well.³⁸ Unruh joined this chorus, but emphasized that MCC "must be treated fairly."³⁹

Unruh and MCC found new common purpose with "war sufferers' relief work." MCC asked Unruh to help its appointed representative in Germany, M.C. Lehman, to "make the necessary contacts in Berlin" and "constructively advise him."⁴⁰ The invasion of Alsace offered another opportunity. Unruh had "some acquaintance" with its new Reich Commissioner, Robert Wagner, Baden political leader in Karlsruhe. Bender asked Unruh to contact Wagner and "make a formal personal application in the name of the MCC" for a Strasbourg child-feeding operation.⁴¹ Karlsruhe's university Rector praised Unruh in these offices as one "with such high qualities—especially from the National Socialist point of view."⁴²

³⁷ Cf. report in *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* (hereafter GBL) 71/1 (January 1940): 3.


³⁸ E. Wetzel and G. Hecht, NSDAP Office of Racial Policy, November 25, 1939, "Denkschrift: Die Frage der Behandlung der Bevölkerung der ehemaligen polnischen Gebiete nach rassenpolitischen Gesichtspunkten," in Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Hitlers Ostkrieg und die deutsche Siedlungspolitik: Die Zusammenarbeit von Wehrmacht, Wirtschaft und SS* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1991), 122f.; 124. With regards to "tens of thousands if not hundred thousand" German resettlers from Russia, German officials expressed some concern about the political perspectives of the youth who had been raised wholly with "Bolshevik-communist ideology"; cf. *ibid.*, 123. Himmler's office also expected a return of Mennonites from overseas; cf. Der Reichsführer-SS und Chef der Deutschen Polizei, *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 29 April 1940, IV, 10, Zentral Parteiarchiv der SED, Reichssicherheitshauptamt, Abteilung IV, R.58/3543, vol. 46, April 1940, BArch-Lichterfelde.

³⁹ B. H. Unruh to District Mayors, Teachers and Churches of Colonies Fernheim and Friesland, April 28, 1940; and Friesland District Mayor to B. H. Unruh, August 15, 1940, in *Auf den Spuren der Väter. Eine Jubiläumsschrift der Kolonie Friesland in Ost Paraguay, 1937–1987*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff, 172–176 (Asuncion, PY: Verwaltung der Kolonie Friesland, 1987).

⁴⁰ Extract from Letter to B. H. Unruh from MCC, November 15, 1939, IX-19-01, box 4, folder 03-19, Europe and North Africa MC Lehman files, December 1939 to April 1940, MCCA.

⁴¹ H. S. Bender, "Report of a Visit to Mennonite Relief Work in Europe, August 1940," HM1-278, box 52, folder 17, GC-A.

⁴² May 10, 1940, Rector, Technische Hochschule (TH) Karlsruhe, to Minister of Culture and Education, State of Baden, Germany, from TH Karlsruhe, Universitätsarchiv Karlsruhe, S499, Schrank 2a, Fach 24. Acquired by John Thiesen, MLA, June 2021.

 **Unruh was given a stipend from the SS Ethnic Liaison Office to organize administrative and pastoral support for Mennonites."**

These new mandates gave a mixed message about MCC's attitude.⁴³ Soon Wagner ordered Jews of Alsace and Baden removed. Throughout his time in Germany, Lehman remained wholly dependent on Unruh.

Germany's invasion of Ukraine again changed everything. Unruh's "exceptionally warm" audience with the *Reichsführer*-SS, Heinrich Himmler, over the New Year's transition from 1942 to 1943 confirmed Unruh's highest hopes. Himmler "told the most complimentary things about [Russian] Mennonites." The dream for Mennonites abroad to return to Ukraine or an expanded Germany was about to be realized. "The resettlement issues will be of unimaginable scope . . . it will probably come true what I told our people when they moved overseas: We will bring you back once again!" Mennonites in Soviet Ukraine, moreover, "will all be naturalized, thus becoming Reich Germans."⁴⁴ Unruh would assure proper racial registration, care and protection.⁴⁵

When the military situation in Ukraine changed, and German forces started their retreat from the Soviet Union, 35,000 Mennonites began their trek west. Unruh was given a stipend from the SS Ethnic Liaison Office to organize administrative and pastoral support for Mennonites.⁴⁶ Unruh wrote about this task:

 **For Peter Dyck, MCC representative in post-war Europe, Unruh was 'German to the core and therefore is not in a position to handle matters which are also the concern of the British and American occupational forces.'**"

⁴³ Cf. "Doc. 113, Report, dated 30 October 1940, on the deportation of German Jews to southern France," BArch, R 3001/20052, fols. 107–108, in *German Reich and Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia September 1939–September 1941*, ed. Caroline Pearce and Andrea Löw (Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 311–312.

⁴⁴ B. H. Unruh to Emil Händiges, January 22, 1943, 1b, letter, Vereinigung Collection, 1943, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Bolanden Weierhof, German (hereafter MFSt). On his visit with Himmler, see also B. H. Unruh, *Die Auswanderung der niederdeutschen mennonitischen Bauern aus der Sowjetunion, 1923-1933*, unpublished draft, MS 295, MLA. Original in B.H. Unruh collection, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford, California.

⁴⁵ Cf. B. H. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive, January 6, 1943, and idem to Gustav Reimer, December 30, 1943, Vereinigung Collection, 1943, from MFSt. Cf. also post-war letter from the former *Sturmbannführer* responsible for Halbstadt, Hermann Roßner to Schirmacher, March 8, 1972, 5, letter, N/756, 256/a, from BArch-Freiburg. Unruh was member of the Central Office for Kinship Studies of Germans Abroad (*Hauptstelle für Auslandsdeutsche Sippenkunde*). In this role he was personally acquainted with the head of the Reich Office for Kinship Studies—the office of racial "experts" responsible to adjudicate Aryan descent.

⁴⁶ Gerhard Wolfrum (VoMi) to B. H. Unruh, September 29, 1943, 159/343, from Technische Universitätsarchiv Karlsruhe. Cf. also Defense testimony by B. H. von Unruh for Werner Lorenz and Heinz Brueckner, December 17, 1947, 2716f. The RuSHA Case, U.S. National Archives Collection of World War II War Crimes Records, Case VIII, Record Group 238, mimeographed testimony; SA 1, file 184, MLA. See also Ben Goossen, "Mennonite War Crimes Testimony at Nuremberg," *Anabaptist Historians* (December 7, 2019), available at <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2019/12/07/mennonite-war-crimes-testimony-at-nuremberg/>.

The *Volk*-community of Greater Germany has cast its eye on us as experienced Mennonite farmers. They want to put our people to work when the victory is won. For our part we will need an unbroken *Volk*-community. We are too devout not to know that it must be sustained and consecrated by Christian faith, not merely—but that too!—by blood. . . . This is our historical duty in this historical hour!⁴⁷

Simultaneously, Unruh was disappointed with MCC's unwillingness to make debt interest payments, frustrating Unruh's negotiations with the German government. "Bender did not act correctly here, and I am still angry with him," Unruh wrote.⁴⁸

After the war's end, 10,000 of 35,000 naturalized Soviet Mennonites were in the western zone of occupied Germany, mostly homeless. "Mennonites in America are slow" in marshalling a relief response, German Mennonite leader Abraham Braun complained to Unruh.⁴⁹ In November 1945, Unruh requested that the Mennonite *Vereinigung* (denomination) confirm him as a MCC representative.⁵⁰ This allowed Unruh to travel through the occupied military zone and gather refugees. MCC's representative C. F Klassen then asked Unruh "to direct the headquarters" of the refugee search from his office.⁵¹ Unruh was also the first to petition Allied Forces to protect Mennonite refugees from repatriation.⁵²

While Unruh understood this post-war refugee work as a culmination of his achievements, MCC's new European representative Peter J. Dyck opposed Unruh, called him an SS-man and falsely insisted (counter to Unruh) that Mennonites became naturalized Germans under duress.⁵³ "If the military authorities happen to come to [Unruh's] conclusion [that Mennonites from the Soviet Union had willingly accepted German citizenship], which they [the Allied military authorities] have not, then we may as well pack our



In 1947, Peter Dyck (left) and a Mennonite refugee prepare for a small Christmas celebration among the other refugees in an MCC-run camp in Berlin, Germany. For months little toys and useful articles were collected so that each refugee might receive some small gift at Christmastime. (From Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Klassen Dyck collection, MCC)

⁴⁷ B. H. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive ("Zur Tauffrage: Ergänzung I zur Einigungsfrage"), January 31, 1944, 6b, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944–45, from MFSt.

⁴⁸ B. H. Unruh, "Grundsätzliches und persönliches an die Vereinigung," January 25, 1944, 3, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, MFSt.

⁴⁹ Abraham Braun to B. H. Unruh, November 19, 1945, letter, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, 1930, 1940, 1944–45, MFSt.

⁵⁰ Abraham Braun, "Zeugnis," November 19, 1945, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, 1930, 1940, 1944–45, MFSt.

⁵¹ B. H. Unruh to the Vereinigung and Verband, December 19, 1945, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, 1930, 1940, 1944–45, MFSt.

⁵² B. H. Unruh to the Vereinigung Executive, December 28, 1945, Benjamin Unruh Collection, Abraham Braun Correspondence, 1930, 1940, 1944–45, MFSt.

⁵³ B.H. Unruh to H.S. Bender, November 8, 1955, letter, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

Goossen, Benjamin. "Mennonite War Crimes Testimony at Nuremberg." *Anabaptist Historians* (December 7, 2019). Available at <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2019/12/07/mennonite-war-crimes-testimony-at-nuremberg/>.

Lumans, Valdis O. *Hitler's Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933–1945*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1993.

suitcases and go home."⁵⁴ For Dyck, Unruh was "German to the core and therefore is not in a position to handle matters which are also the concern of the British and American occupational forces."⁵⁵

After Dyck had shepherded 2,303 refugees to Paraguay and raised monies for MCC's resettlement efforts on a tour of congregations in the U.S. and Canada, MCC tasked Bender to convince Unruh to accept a small pension and promise to withdraw from MCC activity.⁵⁶ Bender did this "kindly," though Unruh strenuously objected.⁵⁷ A decade later Unruh was still bitter; Dyck "told me verbally and in writing that [the resettlement of Mennonites] was because of *his* effort. I was silent . . . All the slander was a lie."⁵⁸

Unruh was always concerned about his historical legacy, viewing himself as the "Moses" of Russian Mennonites. But by 1955 Dyck had taken the mantle. In Unruh's mind, without his efforts MCC would have had no one to save. Dyck was only bitter that MCC had to lie to save the refugees. To Elder Heinrich Winter in Leamington, Ontario, Dyck later said: "How disastrous it was that you accepted citizenship in war-time Germany. . . . Were there no men among you to stand up against this foolishness?"⁵⁹ Unruh took hope again in 1955 with the Soviet release of German civilians and POWs: "Imagine, dear Harold, what that means! . . . Our people are *naturalized Germans*. I was blamed for encouraging this. I did it with good consideration and with prayer! And now *success*."⁶⁰

In 1955, Unruh unsuccessfully petitioned for a pension increase, though MCC covered his publication debt in 1957.⁶¹ "It was not easy" for MCC to decide to give him further assistance, Bender wrote Unruh. "We did it out of love for you and in view of our many years of fruitful cooperation."⁶²

⁵⁴ Peter J. Dyck, "Memorandum on Mennonite Refugees in Germany, 25 July 1945," MCC CPS and other Correspondence 1945–47, file 30, MCCA.

⁵⁵ Peter J. Dyck, "Mennonite Refugees in Germany as on September 5, 1946," report, MCC CPS and other Correspondence 1945–47, file 30, MCCA.

⁵⁶ See Peter J. Dyck and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up from the Rubble* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1991), 250f.; *Lethbridge Herald* (August 21, 1947): 5.

⁵⁷ Keim, *Harold S. Bender*, 394f. Cf. MCC Executive Committee Minutes, August 3, 1948, no. 16, p. 3; and 30 December 1948, no. 19, 5, MCCA.

⁵⁸ B. H. Unruh to H. S. Bender, November 8, 1955, letter, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

⁵⁹ Henry H. Winter, *Shepherd of the Oppressed: Heinrich Winter* (Leamington, ON: Self-published, 1990), 190f.

⁶⁰ B. H. Unruh to H. S. Bender, October 23, 1955, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

⁶¹ MCC Executive Committee Minutes, December 16–17, 1955, no. 34, MCCA.

⁶² H. S. Bender (using MCC letterhead) to Unruh, July 3, 1957, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

Unruh died in 1959. In Bender's *Mennonite Encyclopedia* entry on Unruh, he noted briefly that Unruh worked for MCC "in immigration to Paraguay 1930–1933."⁶³ This statement underplayed Unruh's magnitude: he was a tireless advocate for his people who remains a towering figure in the history of Russian Mennonites, especially in Paraguay. Bender's encyclopedia entry on Unruh also covered over how Unruh's advocacy for and humanitarian efforts on behalf Mennonites from the Soviet Union were inextricably intertwined with his increasingly strident support for the Nazi regime. A full account of Unruh's firm pro-Nazism is an essential part of assessing how MCC's humanitarian efforts with Soviet Mennonites were entangled with National Socialism and its legacy.

Arnold Neufeldt-Fast is the academic vice president and dean of the seminary at Tyndale University.

⁶³ Bender, Harold S. "Unruh, Benjamin Heinrich (1881-1959)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959. Available at: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Unruh,_Benjamin_Heinrich_\(1881-1959\)&oldid=170166](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Unruh,_Benjamin_Heinrich_(1881-1959)&oldid=170166).