During the summer of 2013, I had the opportunity to work as archival intern at each of the four Mennonite Brethren archives in North America (Hillsboro, KS; Fresno, CA; Abbotsford, BC; and Winnipeg, MB). One of my projects was researching two of my great-great-aunts, Bena and Emma Bartel. I chose this project because I knew a little about them, but wanted to know more. I was surprised by what I found in the archives, especially letters describing their time in a Japanese internment camp during World War II.

Jacobena (Bena) Bartel was born on December 28, 1892, just outside of Hillsboro. She was the first child born to Gerhard Bartel (1868–1939) and Eva Bartel (1868–1910). Bena’s studies at Tabor College were interrupted by her mother’s death, as the family needed her help at home. She eventually graduated in 1916. The same year she graduated, Bena signed up with the China Mennonite Mission Society, which had been started in China in 1905 by her uncle and aunt, Henry C. Bartel (1873–1965) and Nellie Schmidt (1876–1946). Bena’s assignment was to teach the children of missionaries in China. She stayed in China until 1923, when she returned to Kansas for a year of furlough.

Emma Bartel was born on August 12, 1897. She felt called to become a nurse and trained at the Bethel Deaconess Hospital Training school in Newton, Kansas. When Bena returned to China in 1924 after her furlough, it was decided that Emma would go with her as a companion.

In June and October of 1938, Bena wrote to Henry and Elizabeth Lohrenz in Hillsboro, detailing the difficulties experienced in their area of China. In the letter I found in the Hillsboro archives, they wrote about cholera and malaria epidemics. Bena also wrote of guerilla soldiers attacking the
villages, forcing people to give them food and money. Travelers were also robbed, losing their clothing and money to the attackers. The threats were not only on the ground; airplanes flew overhead on bombing raids. Communication to and from their family and friends in the US was unreliable, and even more so after December 8, 1941, when the US declared war on Japan.

In December 1941, Bena and Emma were taken prisoner by the Japanese forces that invaded China. They remained in house arrest for a year-and-a-half. In 1943, Emma wrote again to the Lohrenzes, greeting them with Philippians 4:11, 13, and 19: “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content... I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me... But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”

Bena and Emma were restricted to homes chosen for them by the Japanese. However, this did not keep them from spreading the gospel of Jesus’ love. Friends came to the house to enjoy fellowship and prayer. Sometimes others, including officers and guards, stopped in to talk to the sisters. While conditions were harsh, Bena wrote in their 1943 Christmas letter, “God supplied our needs through our Chinese Christians and friends. Both rich and poor were most sympathetic and loyal to us in our time of need.” Although they were persecuted, they did not feel abandoned by God.

On March 17, 1943, they were taken from their home to an internment camp, where they were kept with other missionaries. At the Fresno archives, I discovered a 1943 Christmas letter from Bena and Emma describing their time in the internment camp. “Due to lack of nourishing food and other disagreeable things, we lost weight, strength, and vitality. But praise God, we had religious freedom and enjoyed the sweet fellowship with missionaries and other dear children of God.”

Finally, after six months of confinement, on September 15, 1943, they and the other missionaries who had been in captivity with them were placed on the Japanese steamship Teia Maru. The conditions were terrible. The boat was designed to carry 400, but 1,500 people were put onboard. They had little access to drinking water, and usually had only rice to eat. On October 19, after nearly five weeks at sea, the Teia Maru reached Mormuga, India. In a prisoner exchange, they were traded for Japanese prisoners of war and eventually they made it all the way back to Kansas.

Three years later, the sisters returned to China. They remained in China until 1951, when they were forced by the Chinese government to return to America once again. In America, the sisters continued to pursue ministries of service. Bena moved to Lawton, Oklahoma, where she taught for five years at the Lawton View Mission, an outgrowth of the Post Oak Indian and Mexican Mission at Indiahoma. Meanwhile, Emma worked in Hillsboro as a nurse. In 1958, Bena returned to Hillsboro, and the two shared a house until Emma’s death on October 25 of that same year. Bena remained in Hillsboro until her death on April 22, 1975.

Great-great-aunts Bena and Emma continue to inspire me through their perseverance and faith in God. Although they were in one of the worst situations imaginable, they still found their faith to be strong and trusted that God would see them through. Their letters give witness to a strength and Christian devotion that I find truly compelling.