



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

David Johann Klassen (1899-1990): a thorn in the Soviet side

Someday, when we know the whole story, we will learn how God has sustained his suffering children in times of persecution. We will also learn that the numbers of Anabaptist believers who gave up their lives in the Soviet Union during the 1920s to 1940s will likely far exceed those who suffered a martyr death during the sixteenth century Reformation.

David Klassen was one of the remarkable leaders who emerged during this time of trial. The leader of the Karaganda Mennonite Brethren Church in Kazakhstan (the first Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite church to be officially registered by the Soviets), he spent a total of 19 years in three separate imprisonments.

It is hard to find a picture of him that does not show a man with a friendly, inviting face. In a compelling book about the beginning of the Karaganda church between 1956 and 1968, Klassen's picture appears often and it is clear he was greatly loved.¹ His strenuous efforts on behalf of this church resulted in his third imprisonment (1962-65).

Karaganda was a coal-mining centre. Beginning in 1931 the Soviets sent many

so-called kulaks there—people whom the Soviets deemed enemies of the state. Among them were many Mennonites. Of the first 200 sent there in 1931, a third had died by 1933. Between 1935-38, up to 120,000 prisoners were brought there to build up the city and its industries. Large numbers worked in the mines. Of those with a Mennonite background, many joined clandestine Baptist gatherings. In time, Mennonite Brethren began organizing German services of their own in homes around Karaganda.

After Stalin's death in 1953, an amnesty was declared for some of those imprisoned as enemies of the state. Quite spontaneously, Mennonite survivors of the Gulag who had

been scattered throughout the vast Soviet empire began to find one another. Karaganda became one of their collecting places. Despite government opposition, a Mennonite Brethren church formed with 18 members in 1956, and grew to 900 members just two years later. Services were held in homes around Karaganda.

In May 1957 David Klassen joined the group and was chosen its elder. Now retired on a modest pension,



David Johann Klassen

he drew on his earlier life experiences to give direction to the church. He had already spent 16 years in two imprisonments (his wife Sara had been imprisoned for 11 years). Alongside him were others with similar backgrounds. For most, it meant reconstructing church life after a hiatus of 25 or more years. Klassen played a key role in providing leadership to the groups throughout the city. Preachers were ordained, choirs started, children instructed, regular meetings put in place, and leaders trained. Not only did all this take place under the hostile scrutiny of local authorities, but in Klassen's words even the registered Baptist Church treated these groups as "stepchildren." Alongside Klassen's ministry in Karaganda, he visited many newly emerging Mennonite Brethren fellowships in Siberia, Kazakhstan and other Turkic republics.

Klassen and two others were arrested a month apart in 1962. Heinrich Wiebe, one of those arrested, recognized Klassen's presence in prison when he heard him singing (in German), "My contentment rests in my readiness to accept what I cannot change." Wiebe sang in reply, "We shall meet on that beautiful shore." (Klassen was a musician, singer and composer of hymns. His second imprisonment resulted when he organized a choir in his village.)

Klassen and his colleagues were charged with hooliganism: specifically, leading assemblies without permission and turning children against the state. Before the trial, the three were warned not to speak to one another, but when Klassen entered the courtroom he greeted his "brothers" heartily. "How can I be quiet when they are my brothers?" he told an

official who tried to silence him. He was given the harshest sentence.

Upon being brought to a cell with about 40 prisoners, Klassen told Wiebe they would immediately distribute the supplies they had brought from home. That broke any barriers they might have had with the others. That evening, as they were about to try to sleep, Klassen said he would have an "evening blessing" as usual. He recited some verses of Scripture and 12 verses of the song, "Commit your way to the Lord." The entire cell fell silent as the two knelt to pray. They had won their cellmates' respect.

In 1971 I met Klassen while with one of the early Mennonite tour groups to visit Russia. I'll never forget the impression he left with me. He was a man of joy and unselfconscious freedom in Christ. No longer an elder, he continued to be a spiritual father and mentor to the church, sharing his insights, wisdom and gift of faith. The Mennonite Brethren Church in Karaganda had finally gained official registration in 1967—the first congregation of a believers' church tradition outside the official All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian-Baptist to do so. A year later they were allowed to build their own meeting place.

David Klassen died in Karaganda in 1990, at peace within the church community and family to whom he had given so much. Echoing Hebrews 11:38, one could say of him, "The world is not worthy of people such as this."

1. Viktor Fast, Jakob Penner, *Wasserströme in der Einöde: die Anfangsgeschichte der Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinde Karaganda 1956-1968* (Steinhausen, Germany: Samenkorn, 2007).



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