



AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY J. B. TOEWS

To follow the two autobiographies is for me a difficult task because they are stories that of the calm waters of Coaldale Bible College, bible school, Hillsboro, Chaco. I have to give you a different background. My childhood and youth dates back to Russia where I completed my grade school, highschool and four years in university. My childhood was a deep, deep immersion in the faith of our fathers. The instruction in high school and in grade school demanded extensive religious education. Every hour of the day, the first hour was Bible instruction. At the age of 12 I could have passed the Bible content exam that the Seminary here gives with flying colors. The emphasis in my educational career was a European style, not what you have heard means anything, but what do you know. That was a tremendous discipline. But the calm era of that exposure took a dramatic change. From the highschool followed four years of university at the time when communism took over the educational program. The little school which was at first a Mennonite school was accredited and integrated into the University of Kiev. Instead of every day the religious instruction there was every day political propoganda and a persuasion of materialism. That was the secret of life. I could not but be influenced by that four years of indoctrination. And then I dared to suddenly ask a question, and a serious question in regard to the origin of life and then I came into difficulty. And if it wouldn't have been for the grace of a medical doctor that was at the university, he said "you have to get away, you have to leave the campus." Because I had embarrassed our political



instructor by the question concerning the origin of life. I went underground, succeeded in getting across the border, landed in Holland, there was a Mennonite Relief Committee. They provided opportunity for me to continue studies in my language at the University of Amsterdam. After communism in Amsterdam I was deeply, deeply immersed in the question of agnosticism. You can't know, you don't know. Reality is only if you can proceed with your _____ . Pietism, atheism, agnosticism. And here I was at sea, searching and searching for an answer. It was providential that for the first four months in Europe God gave me the opportunity to share a room with Dr. Benjamin Unruh, who was at the time in charge of the Immigration from Europe. He was an intellectual and he discussed with me at length the issue of faith and recommended to me a book, "Jesus" by Fredrick Kendall. Fredrick Kendall gave a great deal of analysis concerning the secret, the mystery of Jesus, but gave reasonable reasons for faith that he was the incarnation of God. Fredrick Kendall helped me to at least come close again in considering the reality of Jesus in the revelation. My background of high school and grade school, the religious training there and the deep, deep commitment of my father and mother. My father was a very deeply committed Anabaptist person. The literature of Menno Simons was well known to me. I had read all of that during the time when I was a high school student and I returned occasionally while at the university. That is how I came to Canada after, in 1928. I shared a little bit the situation in Coaldale for two years of which Brother Ewert spoke. My spiritual pilgrimage there was accommodation, because I couldn't ask questions

even though I had many questions. After two years I had the urge I had to find a way for further training. I had to learn English. Dr. H. W. Lohrenz came there and he knew some of my background and he invited me to Tabor College. He said we have a good English department there. The time in Tabor College, 1930 to 1932, was for me partly a disappointment. Disappointment because there was no clear direction, no question about the faith of H. W. Lohrenz, no. He was deeply devoted and I would say he was a genuine Anabaptist. But then explain the Bible conferences where all the men that were already mentioned, fundamentalists were the speakers. The secret was his deep commitment to the Bible. And at that time there was a controversy concerning the inspiration of the Bible. At that time we had the controversy also with regard to the entire question of the inspiration of the Bible. Fundamentalism and moderism, the struggle of the 20s and 30s. And I found it in place that he had these speakers there because they gave foundation for the belief in the Bible. I couldn't understand that they didn't realize that I had been for five years at the university, nearly six. Because when I came down to Tabor College they wouldn't give me any credit, they said I had to first have a certificate of the high school, the academy. And you will find in Tabor College a picture of the academy graduates and they have me in there, because I hadn't had American history and hadn't had civics. That's why they could not give me credit. Later that was settled at the University of Portland, Oregon. They settled my educational standing before I came to the Seminary. But they had to live with that. But there was one point that was very important, H. W. Lohrenz

gave a course in theology and he used Mullins, "The Christian Religion and Its Doctrinal Expressions." That gave me the first opportunity to form a consistent logical analysis concerning the theology that I hadn't had before. Of course it was providential, a long story, that's when I finally made my commitment to go into the ministry. With a choice an offer from Shell Oil Company to go back to Europe and become an executive for Shell Oil Company and the other alternative was an invitation to a Bible school in Hepburn, Saskatchewan. There was a very long struggle. I had not committed myself to go into the ministry. That struggle was very, very severe. Finally it was Nettie, at that time my companion, that made a decision. She said, "John, its alright to be poor." When she said that, that evening we committed ourselves to each other, with the words, "its alright to be poor." That helped me to make the decision, that's why I am in the ministry and not an executive with Shell Oil. They offered at that time \$320 per month, plus commission and in Hepburn we got in the first year of marriage \$26.40 per month and lived in a shed. But it was a happy time. That brings me to the crucial issue of my seminary days. I was not committed to the Mennonite Brethren Church. At the Seminary in Portland, Oregon, which at the time was Northren Baptist Convention, it was their Western Seminary. They struggled at that time with the question of liberalism and fundamentalism. A deep struggle in the forties, 38, 39, 40. A leading faculty at the Seminary, they were on the side of the conservatives. When they heard that I came from Mennonite background they were very much interested in me. There were two men that had a marvelous influence on me, Dr.

W. W. Milligan and Dr. Colie Kline. They said, "remember the Anabaptists were the ones that really are the foundation for the Baptist movement." They said, "the Anabaptist, the founder of the Baptist movement was also an Anabaptist, he came from that era." And they said, "remain where you are, remain where you are." And they had things in focus. And it was in a Baptist Seminary with the help of Dr. Milligan and Dr. Kline where I made my commitment to identify with the Mennonite Brethren. I had again to make a choice and an opportunity to remain with the Baptists who again offered me some \$300 a month and then I went to Fremont College and then to Buhler for \$90 a month. And that was always a choice. From Buhler I came into the very life of the congregation. End of the conflict. I lived through the tensions which were at that time in Tabor College with Dr. Schellenberg. That only affirmed me more deeply in my commitment to the Anabaptist point of view. That was also the struggle that went with me when I came then to the presidency of the college in Winnipeg which started in 1944 with 12 students, I came there in 1945. Pioneers in curricula, study materials, facilities, pioneer. There I received further confirmation that I was committed to the Anabaptist view of faith. Why didn't I stay. I was there only three years. Because at that time the college did not give me the liberty to expand. Brother Ewert called attention to that. I had to give account every time when the board met and they met three times a year, how much German, how much English, I did this and I did that, and then they told me when there was the third meeting that they looked upon me as one that had been brought here by God, because I had the education,

that I should rescue the entire transition of cultural change that we would need in the German language. That is the reason I resigned because I couldn't find myself. It was also a member of the board, let me name him. My dear uncle B. B. Janz. I just about had completed my demands for a doctorate when he visited me and said, "now you have gone too far." "You have gone too far." With such persuasion that I discontinued the last three months of my doctoral work and did not complete it in order to heed the warnings of my superiors. That also bothered me when I was in Winnipeg. Here they said I should not complete it and then they called me and said "you are the man that has the education, you shall be the president." Tremendous conflict. And I couldn't handle it, I finished there after three years.

The time is very short. What was the time in Reedley. Reedley was the issue of new orientation to seek to bring a church into the context of my biblical perception of a church. Tremendous struggle, but also a tremendous reward. Because that was the time of the struggles which we had with regard to the expressions of Armeneism and Calvinism. We had a large movement of Pentecostals at that time in the church and in the environment. What helped me was my biblical training that I had received from my childhood and the historical perspective. During that time I also moved into the conference. If you want to know what the conflicts were in the conference just read the General Conference records of the Reference and Counsel because that was the year when I entered into that position and was in that for the next fifteen years. You will see there are the issues also

with the entire transition with regard to the pastor. There was the very difficult transition with regard to eternal security. I just about said social security. There was the issue of culture and faith. In the conference records they speak to that. You read those, the conference records of the '40s and you know exactly what the issues are because I was during those many years the secretary of the committee of reference and counsel. And most of those resolutions I have written those. There you find them. The issue that further came was the issue of missions. From Reedley to the Missions Office. The struggle from change from colonialism to the new era of missions. I have consumed every book that was available for me in order to find my way with regard. Roland Allen, Leslie Newbinger, John R. Mott, Steven Neil. I searched for a way in the direction for foreign mission programs for ten years. The 1957 conference resolution that broke the past and gave a new era, I edited that. It was a very difficult period of ten years. Very difficult. So difficult that the older missionaries who could not find themselves could not die later they had to write a letter to me and tell me how they had hated me before they could die. They asked for forgiveness. But they had to do that to be released. That difficult were those tensions.

Then to the Seminary. I was asked to accept the position of the Seminary president in 1955. I declined, because the Board had first selected the faculty, then they wanted me to come and take the presidency. Brother Ewert made some mention of the situation. And it was at that time declared as an evangelical seminary and you find that it is a Mennonite Brethren Anabaptist seminary. You find that for the

first time in 1964 and I came here in 1963. What were the issues. Again very, very devoted men on the faculty, no shadows. But their entire background was an emphasis on evangelicalism and fundamentalism and we had to break that. I came on the condition that the school would get a different direction and on the promise of that decision I came to the Seminary in 1964. And the Seminary, you have been open and you know all about that. My half hour is over. I conclude. I'm standing here before you as a marvel of God's grace. How I finally was able to get through. First of all deep pietistic Anabaptist orientation in childhood and youth. Then the influence of Atheism. Then the influence of rationalism, agnosticism. Then the long struggle where I did not have a direction. The final help by the Baptist people, Milligen and Kline, to find my way. From there on there has been no wavering. And the various tensions which were there, you could enumerate them. Even now I ask many more questions than I express audibly. And I am not hopeless for the Mennonite Brethren Church, because something has to die til it is born again. New birth meant death. And as a movement we may hit bottom, but there is sufficient inward vitality that it will again be born again. In the transition we do not want to make fun of and say "people you just didn't understand." They are a product of their time. We are products of our time and we must be very careful how we evaluate the Mennonite Brethren in this stage of transition. In the transition there will come a clarification of our commitment. God help us.