

Places and spaces of Russlaender Mennonites in Kitchener and Waterloo

This is a self-guided driving or walking tour of Kitchener and Waterloo, to explore places and spaces of significance to 1920s Mennonite immigrants from the former Soviet Union, known as Russlaender. The places include buildings used for worship, workplaces, and a few homes of Russlaender or Swiss Mennonites who hosted them. If you have suggestions for additional places, contact epp.marlene@gmail.com

Kitchener. Begin at the Crowne Plaza Hotel at the corner of King St. E. and Benton St.

- 1. Less than a block north of the intersection of King and Benton is 40 King Street E. (in 2024 a parking lot). This was the first meeting place for Mennonite Brethren in 1925. They worshipped here until 1935, when they shifted to nearby Church St.
In the first year of arrival, the Kirchliche Mennonites (General Conference) and Mennonite Brethren worshipped in Swiss churches or met together (New Hamburg, Waterloo). On 25 May 1925, the Molotschna Mennoniten Brüder Gemeinde was formed in the home of minister Jacob P. Wiens, then living in St. Jacobs. They had congregations in Kitchener, New Hamburg, Hespeler, Vineland, Leamington. They alternated worshipping at St. Jacobs Mennonite Church and Bethany Mennonite Brethren in Christ (now Evangelical Missionary).**
- 2. From the Crowne Plaza, turn Right on Benton, continue down Frederick St. to Lancaster St. and turn Right to arrive at Bethany Evangelical Missionary Church, 160 Lancaster St., where MBs met on occasion in the 1920s. This historic congregation began in 1874 as a Mennonite Brethren in Christ church, a renewal breakaway movement from the Swiss (Old) Mennonite Church in Ontario. Despite the name similarity, it was not related to the Mennonite Brethren denomination,**

although both emerged in the mid-19th century as renewal movements influenced by piety and revivalism.

3. **Continue on Lancaster to turn Left Weber St. The neighbourhood here is called the East Ward, including streets such as Cameron, Betzner, Duke where Russlaender newcomers were hosted in Swiss Mennonite homes. Despite the government requirement to work on farms, many quickly found work in the city.**
4. **Turn Right on Ottawa St. Just before King St. is 19 Ottawa St. on the left which was built by the MB church in 1953. It is now referred to as WMB-Kitchener Site.**
5. **Turn Right on King St. and continue north. First Mennonite Church, at 800 King St. E, was the first Mennonite church in the Kitchener-Waterloo region, founded by Mennonite settlers from Pennsylvania in the early 19th century. The same year the Russlaender arrived in 1924, First Mennonite Church experienced an internal split that led to the establishment of nearby Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church.**
6. **From King St., turn Left onto Stirling Ave. up to Courtland Ave. and turn Right. Turn Right on Cedar St. and then Left on Church St. The MBs worshipped at 53 Church St. from 1935 until 1953 when they built the church on Ottawa St. This is currently the site of the Martin Luther Evangelical Church.**
7. **Continue on Church St. and turn Right on Benton, then Left on King St.**
8. **Go past Kauffman Rubber factory, now condo lofts. A.R. Kauffman was an industrialist, Lutheran not Mennonite, who was strongly supportive of the Russlaender migration, perhaps mainly as a source of labour in his successful rubber industry. In 1924, he donated a pair of boots for each of the immigrants, and the following year provided a \$25,000 grant to encourage further immigration plans. He was a civic-minded person but has come under disrepute because he was a proponent of eugenics, racial-scientific views that were popular at the**

time. He promoted the production and distribution of birth control devices, in part to limit the fertility of poorer classes.

9. Continue on King St. north towards Waterloo. Cross Wellington St. Note: if you turn Right on Wellington St., and continue 2.5 km you can visit Woodside National Historic Site, childhood home of Prime Minister Mackenzie King who was PM when the Russlaender came to Canada. In 1922, King rescinded an Order-in-Council prohibiting the immigration of Mennonites and thus won favour with the Russlaender for many years to come. However, while he welcomed the Mennonites, King was antisemitic in his views and would not accept Jewish refugees attempting to flee Europe in the 1930s.

Waterloo:

10. Continue north on King St. Turn Right on Allen St., and then Left into the parking lot of Waterloo-Kitchener Mennonite Church, familiarly known as George St. church. The so-called 'Kirchliche' Mennonites who arrived in 1924 initially met for worship in several rented locations, sometimes together with the Mennonite Brethren. In 1925 they organized officially as the 'Mennonite refugee congregation of Ontario,' under the leadership of Jacob H. Janzen. A year later they adopted the name 'United Mennonite Church in Ontario.' In 1927 the Kitchener-Waterloo group moved to this former Presbyterian church which they purchased in 1932. The congregation is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 1924. Janzen became bishop in 1926, gathering together the various locations of Kirchliche Russlaender in Ontario. Janzen was a prolific writer and theologian of poetry, drama, fiction and devotional materials.

11. Return to Allen St., turn Right and continue across King St. and Park St. On the left, 59 Allen St. was the home of artist Peter Goetz, whose family immigrated to Canada in 1929. Peter attended KCI, Doon school of art and studied under Fred Varley of Group of Seven. Peter travelled and exhibited his work widely. His mother Justina was a midwife/healer who maintained her practice at the house. His father was a labourer and later greenskeeper at Westmount Golf and Country Club.

- 12. Continue on Allen to Dunbar Road, turn Right and continue to Erb St. Mennonite Church at the corner of Dunbar and Erb St. This Swiss Mennonite-origin congregation was founded in 1851. This was where the first group of Russlaender newcomers met their Swiss Mennonite hosts on July 19, 1924. Photo images of Russlaender walking up Erb St. from the train stop on Regina St. have become iconic in histories of this arrival. Ontario Mennonites were prepared for about 600 immigrants but ended up finding accommodation for close to 1,000 individuals and families.**
- 13. Turn Right on Erb St., then Left on King St. At the corner of King and Bridgeport Road (now under condo construction) is the site of the former St. John's Lutheran Church, where some Russlaender went to worship.**
- 14. At 90 King St., on the right side, is the former Harmony Lunch, where MBs and Kirchliche Mennonites met together for worship briefly in 1924. The Kirchliche Mennonites continued meeting here until their move to George St. (The popular diner closed in 2020).**
- 15. Continue north and turn Left on Central St. 35 Central St. on the left was the first home of well-known artist Woldemar Neufeld. Neufeld immigrated at the age of 15 with his mother Eliese Neufeld and his stepfather Jacob H. Janzen. The Neufeld-Janzen family was a blended one with 11 children. Woldemar attended art school and was a founding member of the Art Society of Kitchener. He went to the US and eventually established a studio in Connecticut. A painting of this house is in his collection at Conrad Grebel University College.**
- 16. Turn Right on Albert St., then Left on Seagram Dr., then Left on University Ave., then Right on Westmount Rd. North. Turn into the parking lot at Conrad Grebel University College. Just off the southeast corner of the lot is an Oak tree, grown from an acorn harvested at the famous old Chortitza Oak in Ukraine.**