

## LIFE IN AN 'AMISH-JEWISH CULT'

By Robert Rhodes

### STRANGER THAN FICTION

By Joseph Yoder

This past winter I consented to review Patricia Hochstetler's manuscript about a Jewish-Amish cult in which she and her parents were participants. All of a sudden the name of the leader Mack Sharkey appeared on page 23 and hit me like an explosion out of the past. This mystical Jewish Christian (he followed both Old and New Testament commandments) man appeared at the Yoder home on Market Avenue in Hartville, Ohio. This was not so strange because our home was home to many strangers and wayfaring souls along the journey of life. But, Mack Sharkey was the strangest of them all.

I was sixteen years old in 1958 and this man made an impression on me. We did not see him as evil but his demeanor certainly did not fit an Amish-Mennonite culture like ours. Sharkey claimed to be a Nazarite. He did not cut his hair or beard. I still recall how his long beard and hair were neatly tucked into his long sleeved shirt. He wore dark corduroy pants. My mother and sisters had to cook special for him so that he would not violate any of the Old Testament dietary laws. Of course, being a Nazarite, he could not do any manual work at all. I never heard Mack Sharkey laugh. He had piercing eyes that seemed to look right through you.

What do you do with a man who knew the Bible forwards and backwards? He could tell you where any verse or topic was found and could recite verses and entire chapters by memory. In my

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Patricia Hochstetler, Goshen, Indiana, hopes her story of escaping a backwoods religious cult in southern Tennessee will help prevent even one person from falling prey to such a group.

Hochstetler, author of *Delusion: Growing Up in an Amish-Jewish Cult*, published by Baker Trittin Press, recounts her early life in the secretive Lael Colony outside Iron City, Tennessee.

"It was just a total God-deliverance story," said Hochstetler, a member of Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship, of her escape from the cult as a teenager.

Hochstetler's parents—Clarence and Mary Miller Long—had been lured away from their conservative church community near Aberdeen, Mississippi, by the cult's convincing, if unorthodox leader, Mack Sharky, who claimed to be Jewish.

Hochstetler's mother, who was raised Old Order Amish near Elkhart, Indiana, and her father, a Pentecostal, had lived in the Amish-style church community in Mississippi for several years when Sharky appeared.

Advocating a complex weave of Amish and Jewish cultural and religious practices, Sharky became known for his knowledge of Scripture and for his ability to argue his stances convincingly.

Before he left Aberdeen, he had convinced three-quarters of the people there to join him in establishing Lael Colony, a utopian commune he ran in southern Tennessee, near Florence, Alabama.

Once in the colony, Sharky's strict hold on power became apparent, Hochstetler said. He enforced numerous rules and practices, and children were forbidden from singing, listening to music or playing with toys. Birthdays and holidays were never celebrated, and according to Hochstetler, the adults, who were forced to adopt celibacy even within marriages, lived in fear of crossing Sharky—known as "the Elder"—or his wishes.

Hochstetler's story of life in the cult and of her escape from it as a teenager will be told in two upcoming volumes.

The second volume, *Deception*, will be published in November. The third, *Deliverance*, about how her paternal grandmother and an uncle took her back to Indiana after Hochstetler was thrown out of the colony at age 16, will appear in 2008.

Though leaving the commune was difficult—"I did not want to leave

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# Menno-Hof's Dungeon

By Jim Baerg

One of the rooms that we guide people through is the “Dungeon Room.” It is a replica of a 16th-century dungeon with various instruments of torture that were used on Anabaptists imprisoned there because of their call for a church that was free from state control. On the walls are pictures and drawings of the torture and executions of Anabaptists which only served to spread the movement to all parts of Europe and the rest of the world.

I point out the drawing that presents the Anabaptists being burned at the stakes and explain how they used that opportunity to sing, to pray, and to share their faith in Jesus, with joy. This attracted many of the spectators to join them even to the point of being condemned to death themselves.

This always leaves me with three haunting questions:

How would I do as a spectator?

How would I do in the position of the martyrs?

And most haunting of all: What about today? We hear of many Christians having to suffer for their faith in North Korea, China, and North India, etc. In today's world they are not really far away.

What I find interesting is the responses that people make to this presentation. Most Christians, although they usually shudder as does everyone else, agree that the Lord would give them the strength and grace to endure. Many non Christians display a very troubled face, if anything, but are mostly indifferent to the information. Then there are a few Christians who seem to have all the answers.

There are some, however, who become very thoughtful and ponder the implications that this behavior had and is still having on the world today. Others either dismiss the information outright or struggle with what their own beliefs hold especially with regard to the issue of infant baptism.

Most interesting is the response of some Menno-Hof visitors who have apologized for the persecution of the Anabaptists by their religious ancestors.

The dungeon is the low point of the tour but it always gives an opportunity to provide the “high point” in Jesus. The dungeon keeps us in perspective especially when we realize what is happening in the world. The Church thrives during those rough times. It did then and it does now. I like to compare Christians and the Church to a tea bag. It takes some hot water to bring out the flavor!

There are efforts being made even as we speak to work towards reconciliation. A group of Reformed churches in Switzerland has also presented a letter of apology to Anabaptist churches (Mennonite, Hutterite, Amish and Brethren) asking for forgiveness for treating us the way they did in the 16th century and are making sincere efforts at reconciliation. It is quite exciting to read about it and see it happen.

God is still at work reconciling His people to each other and to Himself!

# Volunteer Reflection

By Jim Baerg

We heard about Menno-Hof from our friends, Maurice and Cecilia Berkey (Menno-Hof volunteers) at the Ten Thousand Villages warehouse in Akron, Pennsylvania, three years ago. We thought it would be an interesting service opportunity, especially coming after a long trip across Canada.

Well, we were right; it has been an interesting experience. We've met some very interesting people and I have enjoyed the interaction with them. For example: Wednesday, September 19:

- Two couples of the Holdeman (Church of God in Christ Mennonite) group seemed to appreciate our presentation.
- Three Polish people who used to live where my ancestors came from in Poland (Prussia).
- Three Swiss Germans who I could not understand although they could understand my German very well.
- Two people from Lyndon, Washington—he was baptized by my wife's father when he pastored a Mennonite Brethren church in Blaine, Washington.

I have also appreciated the way the Anabaptist story is laid out. It gave many opportunities to share our cultural and, more importantly, spiritual heritage.

Being at the cash register at the front desk was a stretching experience for Joan and she managed very well and generally enjoys doing service.

We have met many wonderful people that we can now consider to be our friends and we thank God for the health and strength we had in this assignment.

(Jim and Joan Baerg of Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada spent 10 weeks at Menno-Hof as volunteer host and hostess.)

You can now get the current issue of **Reunion** on line at [www.mennohof.org](http://www.mennohof.org). Also get our **Ponderings from the Hof**, (short meditations) and up-to-date happenings under **“What's Happening”** on our website. We welcome your response by email or regular mail.

**Amish-Jewish Cult** ...cont. from page 1

because I knew nothing of the world,” she said—Hochstetler slowly found her way.

“I just kept praying to God that he would guide me,” she said. “It took awhile for me just to see that I had to shut the door to everything I grew up with because it had to be flawed.”

Hochstetler said she hopes telling her story now will help others avoid involvement in groups such as Lael Colony, which disbanded after Sharky’s death in 1969.

“I had never planned for anyone to see [my story] until I was dead and gone,” Hochstetler said.

But convinced that her account could help others, she sought out a publisher.

“We need to trust God more than men,” Hochstetler said. “[This book] wasn’t anything I planned. It was just something the Lord allowed.”

Hochstetler’s books and other details about her life are available online at [www.amishjewishcult.com](http://www.amishjewishcult.com).

(Reprinted from *Mennonite Weekly Review*, 10/15/2007. Used with permission.)

**NOTE:**

Book I: *Delusion*; Book II: *Deception*; and Book III: *Deliverance* by Patricia Hochstetler are/will be available for purchase at Menno-Hof. Cost is \$12.95 plus tax for Indiana residents and \$3 shipping and handling.

**Stranger** ...cont. from page 1

mind, Mack Sharkey was a mystic not unlike Rasputin who influenced the Russian royal family of Tsar Nicholas and Alexandria in the early 20th century.

Mr. Sharkey lived in our home for a few weeks, but one day he had to hit the road. My father John Yoder was a self-taught Bible scholar himself, and in his search for the truth he discovered that a Christian did not have to obey Old Testament laws any more since we now live under the rule of Christ. Mack Sharkey could not tolerate any person who stood up to him and confronted him with the biblical truth and the fact that Christ is the fulfillment of the law. I don’t recall any sharp words or anger from either my father or Mack Sharkey when father asked me to take him to a nearby highway to catch his next ride. Before he left he gave me what I considered a blessing.

Now, I ask you, “Isn’t life interesting?” The riddle of Mack Sharkey is solved almost 50 years after his strange appearance due to Patricia Hochstetler’s persistence of retelling the sad saga of a deluded people in her riveting book, *Delusion*. Thank-you, Pat!

**Menno-Hof’s membership drive** is in full swing and many of you have already sent in your new memberships and renewals. Your membership card offers you the following benefits:

- Free admission to Menno-Hof
- 15% discount on all books and gift items
- *REUNION*, our quarterly newsletter
- Entry to special events and exhibits

There is still time for you to return the membership form and enjoy the above benefits through 9/30/08. Your membership card will be mailed when your membership form is received.

**MEMBERSHIP FORM**

Please enroll me as a 2007-08 member of Menno-Hof as indicated below:  
Annual (October 1 renewal for all members)

Individual \$25.00

Family \$40.00 (Parents plus children 16 and under)

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

STREET \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

Enclosed is my check to Menno-Hof for \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**MAIL TO:**

Menno-Hof  
PO Box 701  
Shipshewana IN 46565

## DIRECTOR'S DESK

In September of 2001 my wife Jan and I moved from Hartville, Ohio to Middlebury, Indiana. We moved due to the decision of the Menno-Hof Board to accept me as director. In the middle of 2001 I terminated 17 years as pastor of Maple Grove Mennonite Church with the blessing and permission of the congregation. There was a good transition in leadership and the congregation has thrived and enjoyed God's provision and blessing in the past six years in many ways. Jan also terminated her position as staff nurse at Akron Children's Hospital. After a brief sabbatical she joined Hospice of Goshen Hospital where she continues as a part-time nurse three days per week.

Both Jan and I feel deeply gratified and blessed with the manner in which God and the community have allowed us to serve. In August we celebrated my 65th birthday. We have decided this is a good time for me to step down as Director of Menno-Hof. This comes in spite of the fact that I have enjoyed almost everything I get to do connected with the Menno-Hof culture and community, such as:

- Promoting the contributions of Anabaptism to the Body of Christ and the world.
- Attempting to re-energize and promote faithfulness in our Amish-Mennonite communities.
- Speaking for the Gospel of peace to a world that is divided.
- Securing and leading a dedicated volunteer group and staff.
- Promoting Menno-Hof by meeting with our donors who believe in our mission.
- Meeting the most interesting people from all over the world.
- Dialoguing on faith issues with anyone who will listen.
- Writing on issues and subjects that are pertinent to our vision and mission.
- Budgeting and wisely using the money that is entrusted to this organization.
- Practicing my Spanish, Pennsylvania Dutch, and faltering German on the community and tourists.

When the search committee and board of Menno-Hof have found the person they want to lead this organization into the future, I will step down. One has to find out what is on the other side of the mountain. I look forward to other challenges and joys as satisfying as the one I presently enjoy in the Menno-Hof community.

—Joseph Yoder



# MENNO-HOF

AMISH-MENNONITE VISITORS' CENTER

P.O. Box 701

Shipshewana, Indiana 46565

*See and Hear  
the Amish-Mennonite Story*

## VISITOR COMMENTS

*"It strengthened my desire to turn from worldly goods and concentrate more on following in Christ's footsteps."*

*"A great variety of media which allows for continued interest in the story of Amish and Mennonite culture."*

*"Very clear presentation of the importance of Christ."*

### Visitors:

**January – October '07  
23,289**

**May '88 – October '07  
778,449**

*Reunion* is published quarterly to keep our friends informed of happenings at Menno-Hof. Direct questions or comments to Joseph Yoder, director, at [jyoder@mennohof.org](mailto: jyoder@mennohof.org)

### Menno-Hof Amish-Mennonite Visitors' Center

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