

Education for Identity A Half Century History of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate¹

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By the 1960s, hundreds of small ethnic private schools had proliferated across Canada. Using a mix of archival sources and oral histories, this article examines the founding and transformation of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, a school formed in 1958 by Mennonites in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The particular definition of ethno-religious identity (Mennonitism) that the school attempted to inculcate in students differed from that promoted by other Mennonites in the province, and also changed over time. As a result, the school's history – and possibly the history of other similar schools – defies simple categories of assimilation or cultural resistance. More such oral and institutional histories are necessary to illuminate the role these hundreds of ethnic private schools have played in the story of Canadian multiculturalism.

Scholarly examination of the history of private schooling in Canada remains limited in both scope and methodology. Much of the earlier work in this field focused on the historical reasons for the creation of denominational schools, and the legal battles involved in maintaining their existence.³ More recently, examination of religious

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³ Two of the more popular subjects of study in this area were the denominational schools in Ontario and the 'Schools Question' in Manitoba. For the history of denominational schools in Ontario, see, for example, Franklin A. Walker, "The History of Ontario Separate Schools: Sources and Problems," *CCHA Historical Studies* 55 (1988): 7-20; Robert M. Stamp, *The Historical Background of Separate Schools in Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 1985); Chad Gaffield, *Language, Schooling and Cultural Conflict: The Origins of the French-Language Controversy in Ontario* (Kingston ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987); and Bernard J. Shapiro, "The Public Funding of Private Schools in Ontario: The Setting, Some Arguments, and Some Matters of Belief," *Canadian Journal of Education* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 264-277. Early work on the Manitoba Schools Question includes Lovell Clark, ed., *The Manitoba School Question: Majority Rule or Minority Rights?* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing Company, 1968); Paul Crunican, *Priests and Politicians: Manitoba Schools and the Election of 1896* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Ramsay Cook, "Church, Schools, and Politics in Manitoba, 1903-1912," *Canadian Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (March 1958): 1-23; Ramsay Cook, Craig Brown, and Carl Berger, ed., *Minorities, Schools, and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960); and Cornelius J. Jaenen, "The Manitoba School Question: An Ethnic Interpretation," in *Ethnic Canadians: Culture and Education*, ed. M.L. Kovacs (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1978).

schooling has centred on the question of public funding of private schools, the expression of religious identity within the public school system, and the role of independent schools in perpetuating class divisions.⁴ Historical study of individual private religious schools has tended to be conducted by the schools themselves, often in conjunction with the celebration of an anniversary of their founding. These institutional histories are often celebratory if not hagiographic, and tend to rely on the school's private written records and not on oral history interviews.⁵

Some of the oldest religious private schools in Canada were founded by either Catholics or Anglicans. British Columbian historian Jean Barman provides an overview of private schooling in that province, noting that these schools sought to provide "a sound, thoroughly English education."⁶ By the turn of the century, public schools supplanted private ones, with the exception of Catholic schools that served the significant Catholic minority that existed in BC. The situation changed with the immigration of Protestants of very different religious beliefs in the early twentieth century. Many of these immigrants had attended or supported private schools in Britain. They believed strongly in the institutional church as "indispensable to faith," rather than emphasizing faith as a personal choice "practiced as easily in a 'non-

⁴ Jerry Paquette, "Public Funding for 'Private' Education: The Equity Challenge of Enhanced Choice," *American Journal of Education* 111, no. 4 (August 2005): 568-595; Romulo F. Magsino, "Human Rights, Fair Treatment, and Funding of Private Schools in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 245-263; Anwar (Andy) N. Khan, "Canadian Education: The Legal Position of Religion," *The Liverpool Law Review* 20, no. 1 (March 1998): 137-156; Greg M. Dickinson and W. Rod Dolmage, "Education, Religion, and the Courts in Ontario," *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation* 21, no. 4 (Autumn 1996): 363-383; Ralph M. Miller, "Should There Be Religious Alternative Schools within the Public School System?" *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 278-292; Sarah V. Wayland, "Religious Expression in Public Schools: *Kirpans* in Canada, *Hijab* in France," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20, no. 3 (July 1997): 545-561; Mary Percival Maxwell and James D. Maxwell, "Going Co-Ed: Elite Private Schools in Canada," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 333-357; James D. Maxwell and Mary Percival Maxwell, "The Reproduction of Class in Canada's Elite Independent Schools," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 16, no. 3 (1995): 309-326.

⁵ Examples include Denys Stephen Penton, *Non Nobis Solum: The History of Lower Canada College and Its Predecessor, St. John's School* (Montreal: Corporation of Lower Canada College, 1972); Frank K. Isaac, *Elim: 50th Anniversary, 1929-1979* (Winnipeg MB: Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba, 1979); Newton L. Gingrich, *Mission Complete: History of the Ontario Mennonite Bible School and Ontario Mennonite Bible Institute* (Kitchener ON: St. Jacobs Printery, 1971); Frank H. Epp, *Education with a Plus: The Story of Rosthern Junior College* (Waterloo ON: Conrad Press, 1975); Gerhard J. Ens, *'Die Schule Muss Sein': A History of the Mennonite Collegiate Institute* (Gretna: Mennonite Collegiate Institute, 1990). A rare exception to these school-endorsed histories is James FitzGerald, *Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College* (Toronto: Macfarlane, Walter & Ross, 1994), which is based on 71 interviews with former students and is highly critical of UCC.

⁶ Jean Barman, "Marching to Different Drummers: Public Education and Private Schools in British Columbia, 1900-1950," *British Columbia Historical News* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 3.

denominational' [public school] classroom as anywhere else."⁷ Their immigration temporarily reinvigorated Anglican private schools. After the First World War, however, demographics compelled these schools to attract more non-British and non-Anglican students to ensure their survival.⁸ Such students were attracted in part by the potential the schools offered for upward mobility.

While the legacy of Anglo and French schooling is well known, Canada also has a long history of religious schools founded by ethnic groups that were neither English Protestants nor French Catholics. The Mennonites, for example, were convinced to immigrate to Canada in the late nineteenth century in part by federal government promises that they could create their own education system. A popular perception of ethno-religious private schools such as those of the Mennonites is that they were created to perpetuate narrow understandings of religious belief and to limit – or at least carefully direct – the integration of students with the wider society in which they found themselves. The history of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate provides some contrast to this perception. Westgate was established as much as an alternative to existing Mennonite schools as to the public school system. Its founders believed the existing Mennonite high schools in the province of Manitoba provided too narrow a perspective, both religiously and socially. Victor Peters, one of the school's founders, promoted a vision of Westgate as an alternative to Anglo-Canadian assimilation, even as he invoked Anglo-Canadian scholars and politicians in support of his perspective. The school's objective was not to preserve a static representation of Mennonite culture and belief, but – in his words – to “take on the good aspects” of others while “discarding the less valuable aspects” of Mennonitism. Over the years, this process resulted in Westgate defining Mennonitism in ways that at times resulted in demands that the school enforce exactly the kind of static definition of identity the founders had wanted to avoid.

Historians of education need to integrate oral history methods with institutional histories to determine to what extent schools like Westgate are characteristic of the history of private schooling in Canada. Private schools are prime sites for examining the ways in which ethnic minorities and religious groups in Canada created, maintained, and redrew boundaries between themselves and the host society.⁹ A variety of questions need to be explored. How have minority groups created institutions (such as schools) to preserve their identities in the face of majority culture(s)? How have those involved in the operation of such schools (teachers, administrators, board members, financial supporters) reshaped their mission over time? How have various stakeholders (students, parents, churches,

⁷ Barman, “Marching to Different Drummers,” 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ Such private schools provided an alternative to the public schools' function as “essentially agents of cultural and linguistic assimilation.” Benjamin Levin and J. Anthony Riffel, “Dealing with Diversity: Some Propositions from Canadian Education,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 2, no. 2 (14 January 1994): 5.

others) received, reinterpreted, or resisted the schools' message? And how was ethno-religious identity itself redefined in the process? These are questions that guide my study of the half-century history of one private school in Manitoba: Westgate Mennonite Collegiate.

The Archival History

Westgate Mennonite Collegiate is a private school in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Roughly half of its approximately 330 students in grades 7 through 12 are of Mennonite background, though the school itself is owned by a number of Mennonite churches in the city. It is "a Christian school grounded in the Anabaptist tradition. It is the mission of the school to provide a well-rounded education, which will inspire and empower students to live as people of God."¹⁰ The school celebrated its 50th anniversary in the 2008-2009 academic year. Alumni volleyball and basketball tournaments; various class reunions; a 280-voice choral concert; an art show; a dance; a camping trip; a display of artwork by alumni and students at Winnipeg's Mennonite Heritage Gallery; and a homecoming weekend featuring a concert by the school choirs and bands, a coffee house-style musical evening, a church worship service, as well as a cyclathon fundraiser (including a 50 km bike ride and a currywurst stand) were among the activities planned as part of the celebration.¹¹ These extensive celebrations were a sharp contrast to the small and uncertain beginnings of the school some fifty years earlier.

On 12 February 1957, a group of nine men and one woman from Winnipeg's Schoenwieser Mennonite Church (now known as First Mennonite Church) met to discuss the possibility of creating a Mennonite high school in Winnipeg.¹² The school's primary purpose would be to provide religious instruction as well as education in the German language. The school also would serve as a "missions opportunity for the community," though the minutes of the meeting do not specify the nature of that mission. Two significant reasons for opposition to creating such a school were raised by those present. The first was the expense. The second was "*die*

¹⁰ "About Westgate Mennonite Collegiate: Mission Statement," Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, accessed September 1, 2011,

http://www.westgatemennonite.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=29&Itemid=52.

¹¹ "Have you heard that Westgate Mennonite Collegiate is turning 50?" *A Westgate Perspective* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 2; "50th Anniversary Events," *A Westgate Perspective* 17, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 1; "Choral Concert Celebration," *A Westgate Perspective* 17, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 3; Bob Hummelt, "Commentary: Strategic Plan Report," Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, October 27, 2009, accessed September 1, 2011,

http://www.westgatemennonite.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=410&Itemid=55

¹² Those in attendance were Aeltester (church elder) Johann H. Enns, Prediger (church pastor) Jacob J. Schulz, Abram A. Vogt, John Konrad, Mrs. F. (Elizabeth) Peters, Hans Klassen, Dr. John A. Peters, Franz Neufeld, Victor Peters, and Isaac (or John) Klassen.

Frage ob der notwendige Idealismus fuer die Sache bestehe” or whether Winnipeg Mennonites possessed the necessary idealism to establish such a school.

Despite these misgivings, a number of determinations were made at the meeting. The group elected to refer the question of establishing a school to the annual meeting of the *Bruderschaft* (where church members would discuss congregational life and make collective decisions). Pastor J.J. Schulz raised the possibility that the education wing of the Schoenwieser church could house the school, and suggested that the school be organized on the basis of a *Verein* (Society). In other words, rather than being owned by the church itself, the school would be organized and governed by interested individuals who paid a membership fee to join the Society. Schulz suggested 100 members at 50 dollars each should be recruited before further action be taken. Elder Johann H. Enns countered that the amount of the fee should be provisional, and both suggestions were accepted by those assembled. It was noted that other Mennonite church congregations were interested in the initiative, including those at Sargent and Bethel (both in Winnipeg) as well as St. Elizabeth (40 km south of the city) and Pigeon Lake (25 km west of the city).¹³

The February 1957 meeting was not the first time a Mennonite high school in Winnipeg had been discussed. The question had been raised at congregational meetings of the Schoenwieser Church at least two years earlier. The initiative had been that of Elizabeth and Victor Peters, who were inspired by their brother Dr. John Peters to attempt to establish a private urban General Conference Mennonite school for their daughter, whose health issues made public school attendance difficult.¹⁴ Dr. John Peters, it was claimed, “immediately saw the value of a form of instruction which would incorporate elements of the Mennonite identity, and was so enthusiastic that he overthrew [his siblings’] idea of a home-school and undertook to initiate plans for a ‘real’ private school supported by interested Mennonites.” The vision for the school was that it should be “a centre of academic excellence, a place where intellectual curiosity and independent thinking would be fostered and where Mennonite values, traditions and culture would be transmitted, in addition to the regular school curriculum.”¹⁵

¹³ “Protokoll der ersten Sitzung des Initiativkomitees zwecks Gruendung einer Mennonitischen Hochschule in Winnipeg,” 12 Feb 1957.

¹⁴ Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives (MHCA), XXII B4, Westgate Collegiate Institute, Catalogs Vol. 986, 25th anniversary catalog, “The Founding of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate.”

¹⁵ *Westgate Perspective* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 3.



Victor Peters.
CREDIT: Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online.

The Mennonite Encyclopedia contains an entry for Victor Peters, but none for his wife, Elizabeth Dyck. Her marriage to Peters and her academic career as a professor of German at the University of Manitoba are mentioned in her husband's entry, but no photo of her is included. This photo of Victor depicts him as an individual devoid of connections. In much the same way, the contributions of women – particularly the Ladies' Auxiliary – to Westgate has (until recently) tended to be underemphasized in public.

The proposed school was not the first such Mennonite educational institution in Manitoba. Russian Mennonite immigrants to the province in the 1870s had established a General Conference Mennonite school, the Mennonite Collegiate Institute (MCI), in Gretna (south of Winnipeg) in 1889. Winnipeg itself already had a Mennonite high school – the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute (MBCI) was founded in North Kildonan in 1945. MBCI, however, was operated by a different conference of Mennonites, the Mennonite Brethren, who tended to be more socially conservative and religiously evangelical than many of the other Mennonite groups in the province. The Schoenwieser Church itself, by contrast, had a reputation as being among the more liberal and progressive of the varied Mennonite congregations in

Manitoba.¹⁶ Nor was the *Verein* principle a new suggestion, as both MBCI and MCI were governed by educational societies composed of individual Mennonite supporters, although governance of MBCI was taken over in 1964 by the Manitoba Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.

By June 1957, only 40 Mennonites were interested in creating the new high school – half from the Schoenwieser Mennonite Church and half from the North Kildonan Mennonite Church. Nonetheless, there were 61 in attendance at a meeting to found the educational society in November 1957, in part due to a letter campaign that assured people that their attendance did not necessitate membership in the Society. The Society was named the “*Mennonitischer Bildungsverein von Manitoba*” (Mennonite Educational Society of Manitoba) and the proposed bylaws were presented to those assembled. Membership fees were set at 50 dollars, with a 5 dollar annual renewal. Members, it was decided, would have to pay only 80 percent of the school fees for their children to attend the new school. Due to the low numbers in attendance, a decision on appointing a chair and executive of the new society was postponed.¹⁷

At this meeting, Victor Peters gave a speech that outlined the vision for the new high school in some detail. Peters described the efforts of the Initiative Committee, and stated simply that the two greatest obstacles to the creation of the school were finding the necessary finances and teachers. He declared that he was personally encouraged, however, by two things. First, testimony by Mennonite teachers and trustees before Manitoba’s Royal Commission on Education¹⁸ showed that the broader “society places great worth on our spiritual and cultural values.”¹⁹ Second, though “our Mennonite leaders often have failed, the core of our Mennonitism is healthy.”²⁰

Peters weaved the history of Canada and of education together with a consideration of North American sociology to argue for a specific role for the new school. He gave an overview of the BNA Act, English-French relations in Canada, British private schools, and the Manitoba Schools Question. He then explained that in the United States, all immigrants were expected to conform to the colonial American ideal, losing their identity in the melting pot of assimilation as they were formed into “real Americans” by the school system. In Canada, by contrast, there was “no clear picture of what a Canadian is,” so the effort instead was to try to make

¹⁶ The church had taken an active role, for example, in the creation of Winnipeg’s Concordia Hospital in 1928 and Bethania Personal Care Home in 1946.

¹⁷ “Protokoll der Gruenderversammlung des Vereins Zur Grundung einer Mennonitischen Hochschule in Winnipeg, abgehalten in der Kirche der Schoenwieser Mennonitegemeinde,” 18 November 1957.

¹⁸ This Commission, chaired by former Deputy Minister of Education Dr. R.O. Macfarlane, reported in 1959.

¹⁹ “...das man heute bewusst grossen Wert auf unsere geistigen und kulturellen Gueter legt.”

²⁰ “Das zweite Ereignis war dieses, und ich musste innerlich sagen das hier unsere mennonitische Fuehrung doch oft versagt, den der Kern unseres Mennonitentums ist gesund.”

all new Canadians into “*Englaender*” (English people). With time, Peters declared, “one not only noticed that this was impossible but also, in and of itself, not desirable.” Public education was “not working” in the United States, and the “rapid assimilation process, in itself criminal,” was bringing about the weakening or destruction of family, relationships, and church.

Peters invoked a number of authorities to support his views that such “American assimilation” was to be avoided, including Canadian historian W.L. Morton and Dr. R.O. Macfarlane, chair of Manitoba’s Royal Commission on Education and former Deputy Minister of Education. Together with such men, Peters believed that

each cultural group should try to preserve that which is good in its own culture and take on the good aspects of other cultural groups, at the same time discarding the less valuable aspects of its own culture. In this way the peoples and cultural groups (*Voelker und Kulturgruppen*) in Canada could nurture themselves – there will be no Balkanization of our country.

Such a process could “lead to a cultural enrichment” of Canada. And such a process would require the creation of more Mennonite private schools.

The proposed new Mennonite high school in Winnipeg, Peters noted, would join the ranks of an already established group of ethnic and religious schools in the city. Jewish, French, and Ukrainian schools had good reputations, not to mention the “fantastic” private schools established by “fellow citizens of Anglo-Saxon background” which attracted students from “the best and most influential families.” The government posed no threat to these schools as long as their supporters were also voters. Rather, the real danger to the ongoing success of such schools lay within these ethnic and religious communities themselves, in the form of either “an inferiority complex or simply ignorance.” The dedication of the church ministers, school teachers, and the school board in southern Manitoba – together with the attitude of Winnipeg Mennonites themselves – would show that, like these other ethnic and religious groups, the Mennonites too wanted to preserve their intellectual and spiritual heritage.²¹

Perhaps Peters’s vision struck a chord with the Winnipeg Mennonites assembled at the founders’ meeting. Perhaps the desire to provide an urban General Conference Mennonite alternative to the rural MCI and the Mennonite Brethren MBCI was the determining factor. Whatever the case, the *Mennonitische Bildungsinstitut* (Mennonite Educational Institute) began looking for a property to rent in the summer of 1957. North Kildonan was the preferred location, but it was

²¹ Untitled typescript with handwritten notation: “V.Peters an die Gruenderversammlung?” Probably delivered at the founders’ meeting of 18 November 1957.

doubted that anything suitable would be available there. The Fort Garry School on Portage Avenue could be rented, but the cost of 400 dollars/month was deemed expensive.²² The school opened in the fall of 1957 in the basement Sunday school rooms of the Schoenwieser Mennonite Church, with Frank Neufeld as both principal and teacher.²³ When Dr. John Peters died that spring, the future of the school was in doubt momentarily. But the board of directors met together with Frank Neufeld, “and with considerable resolve, decided to proceed.”²⁴ The next year, Anna Penner joined Neufeld as a teacher, and the school had 39 students enrolled.

Over the years, the school underwent a number of transformations. The first of these was to the school building itself. In 1959, the school moved from the Schoenwieser (First Mennonite) Church basement on Notre Dame in Winnipeg’s West End to the former North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren Church on Edison Street.²⁵ In 1964, the school moved to 86 West Gate in Armstrong’s Point, a property that had been operated since 1950 as a girls’ school by the Convent of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart.²⁶ It was at this point that the school was renamed “Westgate Mennonite Collegiate.” By 1976, board chair Dave Epp reported that the school was planning to move again and “hope[d] to be in the present facilities [at Westgate] for only one more year.” The school had intended to build an addition on the property at Westgate, but resistance from the Armstrong Point Homeowners’ Association led to a decision not to apply for re-zoning. Facility limitations and tensions with neighbours were challenges in the 1970s (and later). In the absence of a gymnasium, students walked across the Maryland bridge to use the facilities at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, and yet still managed to become provincial A volleyball champions in 1978 (the equivalent of AAAA champions today). Construction of a gymnasium was completed that same year, shortly before interest rates on the million dollar debt incurred to build it soared to double digits.

²² “Protokoll der dritten Sitzung des Initiativkomitees zwecks Gruendung einer Mennonitischen Hochschule,” 11 July 1957.

²³ While board minutes give the date of school opening as the fall of 1957, Frank Neufeld states that the school opened in the fall of 1958. Personal correspondence with Frank Neufeld, 11 March 2011.

²⁴ Personal correspondence with Frank Neufeld, 11 March 2011.

²⁵ “Mennonite Tour of Winnipeg,” Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, May 23, 2008, http://www.mmhs.org/mmhs/Mennonite_Tour.doc.

²⁶ Sister Marthe Baudoin, “The Religious of the Sacred Heart in Canada, 1842-1980,” CCHA [Canadian Catholic Historical Association] *Study Sessions* 48 (1981): 57.



Schoenwieser Gemeinde (now First Mennonite Church), 1957, at 922 Notre Dame Avenue, Winnipeg MB.

CREDIT: Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online.



North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren Church,
1959, at 343 Edison Street, Winnipeg MB.

CREDIT: Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online.



Sisters of the Sacred Heart girls' school, 1964,
at 86 West Gate, Winnipeg MB.

CREDIT: Westgate Mennonite Collegiate.

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Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, 2011, at 86 West Gate, Winnipeg MB.
CREDIT: Westgate Mennonite Collegiate.

In the early decades, the student body at Westgate was almost exclusively Mennonite. Later, there were not sufficient Mennonite students to keep the school solvent. It would have been difficult to attract non-Mennonite students to a private school housed in a church basement or in a converted former church building. The Sisters of the Sacred Heart school building (a former mansion, heavily renovated by the Sisters) was an improvement. The mansion's demolition and replacement with a new wing (pictured above) that housed science classrooms modeled on university labs demonstrated Westgate's need to compete for enrolment with other schools, both private and public. This promotional photo, taken across the river from Westgate, highlights its natural surroundings as a desirable feature of the school to prospective students and their parents.

A second transformation has been the emphasis on German language and culture. At the founders' meeting in June 1957, it was decided that religion and Mennonite history would be taught in German.²⁷ By 1962, of eight Mennonite educational institutions in Canada, only MCI and Westgate were teaching such courses in German.²⁸ By the mid-1960s, the catalogue promoting the school was no longer offered solely in German, though the religion courses continued to be taught in that language. Later, the use of German was restricted to a language course, and French soon outstripped it in popularity. While German language education continued to be offered at all grade levels, it was not seen as essential for the transmission of religious beliefs and values.

A third transformation – and arguably one of the most significant – has been the definition and redefinition of religiosity and of Mennonite identity itself. In 1966, shortly after the move to the school's present location, the school issued a new set of aims, created by the board and delegates from the sponsoring churches. These were much more evangelical than the views expressed by the school's founders a decade earlier. The "chief" and "express" aims of the school were now to "provide a situation in which the student may acquire a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith" and specifically to "lead the student to Christ and to enter into a meaningful relationship with the church."²⁹

Expectations of the faculty were detailed carefully. Teachers were to demonstrate an "exemplary life and Christian testimony." It was "assumed that the qualifications of 1 Timothy chapter 3 would apply to the teachers" – a reference to a Bible passage that outlines the qualities demanded of deacons in the first century church.³⁰ Teachers were expected as well to integrate their Christian faith with their

²⁷ "Protokoll der Gruenderversammlung des Vereins Zur Grundung einer Mennonitischen Hochschule in Winnipeg, abgehalten in der Kirche der Schoenwieser Mennonitegemeinde," 18 November 1957.

²⁸ The other schools were Rosthern Junior College (SK), United Mennonite Educational Institute (Leamington ON), Canadian Mennonite Bible College (Winnipeg MB), Mennonite Bible Institute (Didsbury AB), Swift Current Bible Institute (SK), and Elim Bible School (Altona MB). MHCA, XXII B4, Westgate Collegiate Institute, Catalogs Vol. 986, David Schroeder, "A Sacred Charge," pamphlet, n.d. [1962?].

²⁹ "Aims of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate High School in Winnipeg," 1966.

³⁰ 1 Timothy 3: 2-13 (NIV): "Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household

subject material. Teachers of religion should “preferably have theological training in one of our [Mennonite Bible] schools.”³¹

Students, too, were the target of the new aims. They were expected to grow in both “Christian character and discipleship” as a consequence of studying the Bible and church history and through “personal counseling” by teachers. Students were to be reminded constantly of “the need for people who are willing to dedicate their lives to the service of God and man.” This service was to be offered in both church and society, as Christian responsibility included “home, community, church and world mission.”³²

Two aims that originally had been key to the school’s creation now were relegated to the end of a lengthy list. The first was that the school should provide “thorough instruction” in German; the second, that “an appreciation and understanding of our cultural heritage should be cultivated.” Despite the lengthy list of expectations, an element of the original non-sectarian worldview of the founders was retained in the final two aims: “The school shall not seek to shelter the student unduly from society but shall rather confront him with our society in a way that will permit him to live meaningfully in it. In short, the school shall endeavour to prepare each student to hear and do the will of God in his life.”³³

These aims were created as the result of meetings between church representatives and board members to discuss the future of the school.³⁴ Peter Enns, board chair at the time, stated at one of these meetings that the school was in financial difficulty and that there was “divergent opinion” about the “spirit” of Westgate. An earlier meeting had raised the possibility that the Mennonite churches that were the school’s financial supporters take over governance of the school. Delegates from the churches had discussed this question but were unable to reach a decision, though they did request “clarification on [the school’s] doctrinal stand.” This meeting ended with the expression of personal views of the church delegates rather than opinions representative of their church congregations:

Each church cannot make individual demands of the school. –
Churches should cooperate with the existing society [*Verein*]. –
Private high schools should be [church] conference supported. – The
school will have to hire teachers that are acceptable to the public.

well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.”

³¹ “Aims of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate High School in Winnipeg,” 1966.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ MHCA, XX-6 John P. Dyck Collection, vol. 3141, folder 4, “Minutes of the Meeting of Representatives of Various Winnipeg & District Churches to Discuss the Private School,” 1966.

The discussion ended with commentary on what was presumably bad press about the school in both *Der Bote* and *Die Steinbach Post*, two German-language newspapers in the province. Though no details of the content of these articles are given in the minutes, it is noted that board members present at the meeting asserted that the news items did “not represent the views of the faculty and the board.” The meeting concluded with a decision to revisit the “principles and rules” of the school, a decision which led to the creation of the 1966 aims already discussed.

Despite the adoption of those detailed aims, criticism of the school’s religiosity continued to arise from time to time. An article titled “Tough Minds and Tender Hearts,” appearing in *The Canadian Mennonite* in 1970, observed that Westgate was “weathering a profusion of bitter criticism” for its appearance on CJAY television’s “Sundayscope” program.³⁵ Some churches and board members had been “appalled by the content of the program.” Though the article did not mention the cause of the offense, historian Ted Regehr states that the televised appearance of body-stocking-clad students dancing to hymns and gospel songs was considered scandalous by some Mennonite viewers.³⁶ Three churches cancelled plans to promote the school in protest of the school’s TV appearance. *The Canadian Mennonite*, an institution that was itself often on the liberal if not provocative end of the Mennonite spectrum, supported the school, declaring: “The program seems to have been well received by viewers and particularly the TV station itself. The reaction, however, has been vicious, costing the school thousands of dollars.” The article concluded with the observation that the school was “somewhat vindicated” in that their appearance prompted the station to seek more Mennonites as guests for five episodes of another TV program, and Westgate’s choir was invited to sing for a Canadian School Trustees Association meeting. Such secular affirmation probably did little to assuage the concerns of those who were troubled by the school’s actions, however.

The Oral Histories

As the school’s fiftieth anniversary approached, a committee of alumni, faculty, and board members was formed to plan celebrations. This committee mooted the idea of a history book in the year prior to the anniversary, and I was invited to be its author. I first presented a proposal to the school’s board of directors in May 2008. After further discussion, I suggested in August 2008 that a serious academic book be produced – not merely a coffee-table pictorial or celebratory monograph – and that application be made for research grants. In September 2010, the school received a grant of 2500 dollars from the Spletzer Family Foundation and the Chair in German-

³⁵ G.C.F., “Tough Minds and Tender Hearts,” *The Canadian Mennonite* 18, no. 23 (12 June 1970): 5.

³⁶ T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 258.

Canadian Studies at the University of Winnipeg. This funding allowed us to purchase some Zoom Handy digital recorders and begin an oral history project that would serve as additional source material for the book.

Interview participants were sought in a number of ways. Advertisements were placed in two national Mennonite church periodicals: the *Canadian Mennonite* and the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*. Additional ads were placed in the church bulletins of the individual churches that were members of the provincial conference: Mennonite Church Manitoba. Participants also were solicited through a posting on the school's website and on Facebook. All current board and staff members were requested to participate, by volunteering to be interviewed and by suggesting names of potential interviewees. At the time of writing, more than 40 potential interview participants have been identified, and I have conducted thirteen interviews.

The interview process being used for this project is a variation on the four-stage life history process outlined by German oral historian Alexander von Plato.³⁷ In the first phase, participants are asked to tell the story of their lives. The second stage asks questions to clarify details of the life story just shared that may be unclear. If not shared during the first stage, participants are to provide details about their parents' occupations and church membership, their own church membership, and why they decided to become involved with Westgate. The third stage addresses issues of particular interest to the research. Questions asked may include: How was Westgate different from other schools? Can you describe memorable people? events? challenges? Additionally, interviewers are encouraged to ask about memories of various facility moves and expansions, of the school's relationships with neighbours, and of celebratory events (graduation, dances) that have changed over time. Other questions that are asked at this stage include: What does/did being Mennonite mean to you (as a child/student/teacher/parent/board member/pastor)? What did Westgate teach you about what it meant/means to be a Mennonite? How do you think that understanding of Mennonite identity has changed over time? The final stage of von Plato's process is a confrontation or debate phase. Here, participants are asked what they believe to be the future of a school like Westgate, given that membership in Mennonite churches is declining in Canada. In essence, they are asked to justify, from their experience, the ongoing life of the institution – a question of interest to the historian in that it requires interviewees to probe more deeply into their history with the school and their understanding of Mennonite identity.

Three of the interviews conducted were with Frank Neufeld, Anna Penner, and Ozzie Rempel. These are individuals who have had long histories and significant

³⁷ Alexander von Plato, "Contemporary Witnesses and the Historical Profession: Remembrance, Communicative Transmission, and Collective Memory in Qualitative History," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009). Parts 7 and 8 of Alexander Freund's extensive interview with von Plato provide further explanation of this four stage process. Alexander Freund, "Oral History as Experienced History (*Erfahrungsgeschichte*) – An Interview with Alexander von Plato," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009).

involvements with Westgate. Frank Neufeld and Anna Penner, as noted above, were the school's first teacher and principal of the school, and the second teacher hired by the school, respectively. Penner also is the mother of the current board chair. Ozzie Rempel has taught at Westgate for more than thirty years, and has been its vice-principal since 2005.

Frank Neufeld was born in the Ukraine and came to Canada with his parents at a very young age. He graduated from Mennonite Collegiate Institute in 1943, married three years later, and began teacher training. After working for eleven years in the public school system, he was asked by the board to organize the Mennonite Educational Institute (now renamed Westgate Mennonite Collegiate). He was employed at the school from 1957 until 1965. Though he worked to the end of the 1964-1965 academic year, he submitted his resignation to the board in December 1964. He said he found it too difficult to be simultaneously a full-time administrator, teacher, and fundraiser for the school. The board urged him to stay, he says, but he declined. After his departure, Neufeld says he was "amazed at how quickly" the board could find secretarial help and assign only administrative (and no teaching) duties to the principal, yet would or could not do so for him. It is a matter of regret for Neufeld as well that he did not receive any pension from the school.³⁸

After Westgate, Neufeld became a school inspector for the province of Manitoba, and worked with the Department of Education until he took early retirement in 1985. From that date until 1991, he served as liaison to independent schools in Manitoba. This position presented him with opportunities to observe Westgate from a different perspective. He was somewhat disappointed by the relaxed interactions between staff and students he witnessed, which he interpreted as lacking in respect for authority.

Recalling his time as teacher and principal at Westgate, Neufeld noted that he had "very excellent people to work with" and would not have joined the school had it not been for the "deep sense of commitment" of the first board. He commented that he had been the one to ask Karl Fast – the teacher who became the heart of the school's religion and German programs in its early years – to join Westgate. Fast at first declined, as he did not have teacher certification and believed his English language skills were insufficient. Neufeld approached the Department of Education and the University of Manitoba on Fast's behalf, and assisted Fast in obtaining the necessary credentials.

Neufeld recalled that, at first, the school was supported by only three churches: First Mennonite (in Winnipeg), and the Mennonite churches in North Kildonan and Pigeon Lake. While Neufeld was reluctant to discuss the controversial theology of First Mennonite and its effects on the founding of Westgate, he acknowledged that the leadership in these three churches was "on the same

³⁸ Frank Neufeld, first principal of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, interview by author, Winnipeg MB, 8 December 2010.

wavelength.” Two of the first *Aeltester* (elders) of First Mennonite Church, Rev. Johann H. Enns and Rev. Johann P. Klassen, did not support literal interpretation but “emphasized the intent and the spirit” of the Bible.³⁹ As a consequence, First Mennonite Church was viewed as theologically suspect by more religiously conservative Mennonites in the province.⁴⁰ Matters came to a head in 1945, when Rev. Enns delivered an address on the life and thought of sixteenth-century Anabaptist Hans Denk at a conference attended by other Mennonite pastors and deacons. He spoke uncritically of Denk’s universalist beliefs; that is, that all would eventually be saved, including those condemned to hell. The church’s liberal theological views,⁴¹ together with its members’ participation in “worldly” activities,⁴² resulted in a series of public condemnations by other Mennonite individuals and organizations and, ultimately, the congregation’s withdrawal from membership in the national and provincial Conferences.⁴³ While he would not discuss these events during our interview, Neufeld did recall that there was a “strong perception that because of earlier disagreements among church leaders, only three churches were involved at the start” in the founding of Westgate. He said that there was “considerable questioning by other churches” of the need for an urban Mennonite school, but that other Mennonite churches later joined as financial supporters of Westgate.⁴⁴

It was his connections with students that Neufeld declared was the “wonderful thing” about his experience at Westgate. He lived in North Kildonan at

³⁹ Ernest J. Enns, *Jubilate: 60 Years of First Mennonite Church, 1926-1986* (Winnipeg MB: First Mennonite Church, 1991), 63.

⁴⁰ Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada*, 178.

⁴¹ The church council emphasized that “human knowledge of the end times and eternity is incomplete, that they should be regarded as a great mystery of God, and that the primary concern of Christians should be the discharge of their responsibilities during their short span of life on earth.” Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada*, 181.

⁴² For example, the church was not averse to dancing, social drinking, card playing, or acting. The church’s *Jugendverein* (young people’s group) presented dramas at Winnipeg’s Austro-Hungarian Hall and at Prosvita (a Ukrainian hall) at a time when many Mennonites were morally opposed to theatre productions. The *Jugendverein*’s activities led to the founding of the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre. Enns, *Jubilate*, 46, 79; Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada*, 178.

⁴³ The church was readmitted to national membership in 1949 (after Rev. Enns was forced to agree with the conference’s condemnation of universalism), and to provincial membership in 1968. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada*, 179-182. A footnote in the church’s anniversary history remarks, “The foregoing is the official version of this happening; unofficially more can be told about this unfortunate affair than is cited here or will be found in official Conference reports or minutes.” Enns, *Jubilate*, 63-64.

⁴⁴ Neufeld joined First Mennonite Church as a member in either 1945 or 1946, and so would have been in the congregation when Rev. Enns was undergoing questioning and condemnation by provincial and national church leaders. Neufeld transferred his membership to North Kildonan Mennonite Church in the mid-1950s. He has been very active in his congregation, and has served on the executive of the Conference of Mennonites of Manitoba, as church moderator, as choir conductor, church council chair, and church anniversary committee chair.

the time, as did many students, so he had “always a car full” of them with him on his commute to work. When the school was housed in First Mennonite Church, he ate lunch with the students, and they “talked freely” together. Once the move to Edison had been made, he had lunch instead in a small staff room that seated only four. Students, meanwhile, took their lunch in the former Sunday school rooms, and were mostly unsupervised, except when Neufeld heard them getting “rowdy.” This lunchtime separation of staff and students continued with the move to Westgate (though regular ‘lunch duty’ supervision of students was introduced), but there were other points of social contact between the two groups. Staff members “and their wives” planned a “special evening” every Christmas for students, that involved decorating and treats; the night was “festive, and much appreciated.” Victor J. Schroeder, pastor at North Kildonan Mennonite Church, invited staff and students to a lawn party on at least two occasions. Female students attended wearing *dirndl* (traditional German folk costume for women) and male students wore “neat clothes;” these parties, too, were “very special.” The group sang German folks songs together. Staff and students also bonded over the production of a series of German plays, directed by teacher Karl Fast. All these activities, Neufeld concluded somewhat wistfully, were part of “another life in another era.”

Neufeld spoke of the financial struggles of the school throughout its history. He said he was “amazed at how board members dipped into their own pockets” to keep the school open. Many board members signed loans to the school, uncertain that the school would be able to repay them. Door-to-door fundraising and canvassing of Mennonite church members were a regular occurrence. The operation by the school’s Ladies Auxiliary of a thrift store “grew to be a very strong support arm of the school.”

Like finances, facilities were an ongoing challenge for Westgate. The school opened in two “very small” Sunday school classrooms at First Mennonite Church. In the absence of a gymnasium, students played table tennis in the church basement, and used a community playground and a cultural centre on Bannatyne Avenue. Wanting a more permanent facility, the board purchased the former North Kildonan Mennonite Church at 343 Edison and renovated it with volunteer labour. Men built walls and women laid floors; together they plastered and painted. Neufeld, his wife, and Karl Fast’s wife transformed the church’s balcony into the school library. At this location, the parking lot was used as a playground, where students created an ice rink to play broomball. The facility was “primitive, but we tried to make it work.” Working conditions were greatly improved when the school made its move to West Gate. At the school’s earlier locations, Neufeld had been required to store equipment and chemicals for chemistry and physics experiments in the basement of his own house and transport them to school as needed. Nonetheless, the West Gate location – with its mansion that had been modified into a school by the Convent of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart – “had its drawbacks, too.”

Anna Penner was born in Canada, the daughter of the minister of Niverville Mennonite Church. Like Frank Neufeld, she is a graduate of MCI. She said she has “always taught among Mennonites” in Manitoba.⁴⁵ Her first school was near Steinbach, at Burwalde. She also taught at Carothers, at Argyle, and in Niverville. She saw an advertisement in the Mennonite German-language periodical *Der Bote* for a teaching position in grades 7 and 8 at Westgate, and applied. She was interviewed by members of the board “at the corner of William and Salter” streets in Winnipeg, rather than in the church that was the school’s first facility. Penner taught only briefly at Westgate, quitting to raise her family. Frank Neufeld was her colleague and principal, whom she described as “old school. He held the reins tight.”⁴⁶

Like Neufeld, Penner was unwilling to go into detail about the suspicion with which other Mennonites viewed First Mennonite Church and its effect on Westgate. She, too, observed that the North Kildonan and Pigeon Lake Mennonite churches were early supporters of Westgate, and that though “other Mennonites were not interested,” they “slowly realized the value” of the school. Penner also emphasized the important role played in the financial survival of the school over the decades by the school’s Women’s Auxiliary. For decades, this group arranged an Art and Music Festival at Polo Park, one of the city’s largest shopping malls, which attracted hundreds of spectators and raised significant funds for the school. The Women’s Auxiliary also ran a Thrift Store whose proceeds went to Westgate, volunteering their time to staff it. “Those ladies really saved the school,” Penner emphasized.

Ozzie Rempel was born in Buenos Aires, and came to Canada as a child with his family. A graduate of Manitoba’s public school system, he took a science degree and trained to be a teacher after having spent time travelling and working in Europe. He began his teaching career at MCI. Though he “loved it,” he did not want to “stay there forever” and so quit his job and worked as a substitute teacher in Winnipeg. In 1979, he was invited to apply for a teaching position at Westgate, and has been at the school ever since.⁴⁷

Rempel’s first years at Westgate were different from his experience at MCI, and were “traumatic, to a degree.” He “felt a different connection to administration.” Part of the problem was that the school was in the midst of a challenging building project – a conversion of the former Convent of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. These early years felt “adversarial” rather than “collegial,” Rempel noted. Staff met in each others’ homes to discuss how the administration of the school was “not going well.” Shortly thereafter, the principal resigned – whether at the invitation of the

⁴⁵ Anna Penner, former teacher at Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, interview by author, Winnipeg MB, 9 February 2011.

⁴⁶ She recalled that Neufeld expelled a student for smoking in the church building that housed the school. At the time, the school had only been open for one month.

⁴⁷ Ozzie Rempel, vice-principal of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, interview by author, Winnipeg MB, 27 January 2011.

board or of his own volition is unclear – and the situation improved, from Rempel’s perspective.

The next principal was a lay minister with a “very different administrative style” due to his commitment to collaboration and background in counseling. “After a while, the staff was looking for stronger leadership” which was not so conflict-averse, Rempel commented. This principal was succeeded by the school’s former guidance counselor, who did a number of “good things for the school”: increasing funding for professional development, and restructuring tuition to incorporate all school fees (replacing many small fundraising initiatives for school programs that absorbed too much teacher and student time and energy). When this principal left for a position as an assistant superintendent in the public system, the board hired its first female principal. Rempel observed that she was “really good at recognition,” acknowledging staff efforts with cards and supportive comments.

Rempel, like Neufeld, described how the school facilities affected working conditions for teachers and students. He recalled the “old mansion” that had been converted into a school by the Convent of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart before Westgate purchased it and built additions to it. Typing classes were held on the third floor of this mansion, and the stone basement was a “dungeon” where, he said cryptically, “you didn’t want to find students but you did.” The design of the 1978 addition to this mansion was flawed, he noted. A classroom was to have been the cafeteria. Without a lunchroom, students ate in the halls, leaving them messy. As a consequence, “if you came early to school, you saw mice all the time.” What later was renovated into a bright and airy cafeteria was, in the 1970s and 1980s, the school’s chapel: a dark space with a stage, a stippled ceiling, and dim pot lights. With the construction of the 1989 addition to replace the mansion, Rempel felt he had “won the lottery.” The biology lab, where he teaches, is, he claims, the “nicest classroom in the school.” He visited other Winnipeg schools to observe their lab facilities because he and the other science teachers were able to design their own labs with board approval. More than twenty years later, he asserted, these labs are “still functional” and “great.”

Rempel echoed Neufeld’s comments on the financial precariousness of the school throughout much of its history. He noted that the creation and resolution of the “debt crisis” from construction of the school’s first gym in 1978 was “really astounding.” At the time, the school owed 1 million (in 1979 dollars), and with interest rates at 20 percent, the debt only kept increasing. The school made a “herculean effort to retire the debt.” The Ladies’ Auxiliary took on a portion of the debt, which they intended to retire through profits from the Thrift Store. Other individuals also took on portions. The debt was paid in its entirety in the mid-1980s. At the spring concert in the year of the debt retirement, First Mennonite Church minister (and Westgate board member) Roy Vogt addressed those assembled, saying “we cannot afford to be complacent” and that the school needed to look ahead to the next construction project. Rempel found such confidence “astounding.” After having

had serious concerns about the ability to repay the gymnasium debt – accompanied at times by challenges meeting payroll obligations – the board launched another building campaign within a few years. By 1989, a new three-quarter million debt was undertaken to tear down the old mansion and replace it with a new facility – an action Rempel described as “really impressive.”

Reflections and Conclusions

At the time I began this research project, I was employed as a teacher at Westgate. Recognizing the challenge of fitting in this research with my teaching duties, administration suggested that I choose some colleagues to assist me in conducting interviews. In February 2011, Bob Hummelt, Ozzie Rempel, Wilma Johnson, Neil Ens, and Terry Dirks attended a workshop I led on oral history practice and the use of the Zoom Handy digital recorder. Bob Hummelt began teaching at Westgate in 1982, and became principal of the school in 2007. Ozzie Rempel has taught at Westgate since 1979, and has been vice-principal since 2005. Wilma Johnson is a Westgate graduate, and has been the school’s librarian since 1995. Neil Ens has taught keyboarding, computer literacy, business, digital photography, desktop publishing, and web design at Westgate since 1999. All three of Terry Dirks’ daughters are graduates of Westgate. Their experience led her to apply for and accept a job teaching English at the school.

My intention is to write a social history of ethno-religious identity in the context of this school. I sometimes fear that interview participants will fixate instead on the standard topics of traditional institutional histories (leaders, finances, building campaigns) or present uncritical triumphalist accounts of the history of the school. And I wonder how my relationship with the school and my identity as a Mennonite may affect interview participants’ willingness to discuss openly any potentially challenging aspects of the school’s history. Neufeld and Penner, for example, were unwilling to discuss First Mennonite Church’s religious conflicts with other Mennonites and the subsequent effect on the early years of Westgate. I speculate that their reluctance to do so may have been in part a result of their understanding of Christian forgiveness. During my interview with Rempel, he asked to have the recorder turned off at various points in order to discuss aspects of the school’s history more candidly (and off the record) with me – as a colleague rather than as a researcher. While I am no longer employed at Westgate,⁴⁸ I nonetheless have a long personal history with the school (as both a former student and teacher), which doubtless shapes the way interview participants respond to me. I have conducted

⁴⁸ In July 2011, I accepted a tenure-track position in the Department of History at the University of Winnipeg.

other oral history projects⁴⁹ where I shared an ethno-religious identity with my interviewees, so this phenomenon is not new to me. I console myself with the thought that it is not really problematic should interview participants prove reluctant to discuss the process of identity negotiation hinted at by the archival records, as Alessandro Portelli has shown that silences and misrememberings have their stories to tell too.⁵⁰

Historian Robert Orsi argues that religious identity is not fixed, but is developed in the context of, and in response to, particular historical and material conditions. These brief stories from the history of Westgate suggest that the school was a significant site where Mennonites debated their identity as an ethno-religious group in a new urban environment and sought to redefine Mennonite identity for the post-Second World War generations. Archival records reveal that church pastors, school board members, teachers, students, and others made competing claims for authority in the construction of this identity. Oral history interviews with representatives from these groups have begun to be conducted as part of the Westgate History Project so generously funded by the Spletzer Foundation and the Chair in German Canadian Studies. Together with the archival record, these interviews will provide a valuable insight into this process of negotiation. The history of ethnic and religious private schools has taken on new significance in Canadian history since multiculturalism became official government policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. T. Krukowski, writing in the wake of the 1963-1969 Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, noted the emotional responses at the time – positive and negative – to the demands for government funding of programs and institutions to transmit ethnic identity to young people.⁵¹ Krukowski deplored the ignorance of history exhibited by many participants in these debates, observing that German was the language of instruction in schools in the Maritimes in the eighteenth century and in areas settled by ‘Mennonites’ [sic] in Ontario in the nineteenth century. He estimated the number of private ethnic schools in Canada in 1968 as more than five hundred and their enrolment as between 75 000 and 85 000.⁵² The majority of these schools, however, did not have their own buildings or even hold classes every weekday. Instead, they tended to offer classes on weekends, and operated out of a “parish hall, club room, [ethnic] association's

⁴⁹ Janis Thiessen, *Manufacturing Mennonites: Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); *Labour and Lived Religion: An Oral History of North American Mennonites* (manuscript in development).

⁵⁰ Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); *The Order has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

⁵¹ T. Krukowski, “Canadian Private Ethnic Schools,” *Comparative Education* 4, no. 3 (June 1968): 199-200.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 201.

headquarters or private houses,” though some also used public school buildings. Instructors at these schools were often underpaid or were volunteers, and not all were qualified teachers.⁵³ Individuals, ethnic associations, fundraising events, and tuition provided funding to operate these schools – a revenue stream whose inadequacy fed demands by private school supporters for public funding.⁵⁴ Krukowski viewed the continued existence of these schools as “a sign of the recognition of Canadian cultural pluralism as a national resource, yet to be developed in a well-thought-out manner, but benefiting all groups and Canada as a whole.”⁵⁵

Westgate’s early history is typical of this description of Canadian ethnic schools in the late 1960s. In later decades, the school’s move to new buildings, its declining emphasis on German language and culture, and the persistent debates about whether the school was ‘religious enough’ reveal its struggles with questions of ethno-religious identity and integration with the larger society. Interviews with the school’s first principal, first female teacher, and current vice-principal demonstrate the significance of women in the ongoing success of Westgate: the financial precariousness of the school throughout much of its history, and the vital role played by women, was a focal point of their oral histories. The book-length history of Westgate that will be produced as a result of this project will be one step toward generating the kind of detailed analysis that is needed of the role that these hundreds of ethnic schools have played in the story of Canadian cultural pluralism. The history of Westgate – and possibly of other such private schools – defies simple categories of assimilation or cultural resistance. More such institutional histories that incorporate oral history are needed.

⁵³ Krukowski, “Canadian Private Ethnic Schools,” 202.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*