

## MCC: One Hundred Years Old (Part 3, Key Leaders in the Famine Relief)

Part One of this series covered the founding of MCC as a united Mennonite relief organization in response to the famine in the Mennonite villages in Russia; but ended with the disappointment of the fledgling organization being shut out of Russia due to the Bolshevik Red Army victory of 1920. In Part 2, the actual famine relief was covered: Getting access through the Soviet government, setting up the movement of food and the establishment of soup kitchens starting in early 1922. This was followed by donations of clothing, farm animals and eventually tractors and seed. By late 1923 crops were improving, disaster had been averted and the feeding kitchens began to wind down, finally closing in the summer of 1924.

In this final installment, I hope to highlight a few of the key players in this remarkable effort: Orie O. Miller, Clayton Kratz, Arthur Slagel and Alvin Miller.

### **1) Orie O. Miller**

One of the most influential and effective Mennonite leaders of all time, Orie O. Miller was born July 7, 1892, in Middlebury, Indiana. Orie had always wanted to serve the church full-time in some way as a schoolteacher, minister, or missionary. Before attending Goshen College, he taught public school, and remarkably, after his freshman year (before he attained his degree), he directed Goshen's School of Business.

Orie graduated from Goshen College in 1915, and that August married classmate Elta Wolf. The couple moved to Akron Pennsylvania where Orie soon became a part-owner in the shoe company (Miller Hess) headed by his father-in-law. Despite the growing success of the shoe business, Orie still felt called to church work (his church was of the 'old' Mennonite Church (MC) of Swiss - South German origin), particularly the ministry. He was a ministerial candidate at his church (Ephrata Mennonite) three times, but each time his lot was not drawn.

But the larger church did call and asked him to help in post-WW1 relief work in Syria mainly with Armenian refugees. With his wife's assent and a leave from the shoe business for several months, Orie sailed for Beirut in January 1919. As part of the Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers, Orie and the other 30 Mennonite volunteers supported the work of Near East Relief (NER) in Beirut, managing and distributing NER aid along with hundreds of other American volunteers. (At that time, over 50 Mennonite volunteers also assisted reconstruction work in France in partnership with the Quakers.)

It was in Beirut that Orie developed his administrative and organizational skills that suited him so well for MCC, being appointed the "Commanding Officer and Director of

the Beirut District' for NER. After travelling through Europe meeting Mennonites there and encountering the Studienkommission of Russian Mennonites (who were seeking aid due to revolution, civil war and famine), he returned to the U.S. in April 1920.

When back home, Orie spoke often to Mennonite and other groups, talking of his NER experience and the developing famine in the Mennonite colonies of Russia. In addition, Studienkommission members toured through the US and Canada educating North American Mennonites on conditions in Ukraine. Three months after his return, Orie again agreed to leave home to help those in need. Various Mennonite churches formed relief committees, but as mentioned in Part 1, these committees came together to form a "Central Committee" in July 1920. Orie was chosen to direct the first unit of volunteers. Despite his father-in-law's protests that he was needed to run the family business<sup>1</sup> and again leaving his wife and small children behind, he went to do what he could to aid his fellow Mennonites.

On September 1, 1920, Orie and two companions; Arthur Slagel (a Hesston College music teacher) and Clayton Kratz (a Goshen College student) set out from New York for Constantinople (Istanbul). Once there, Orie used his NER experience...leading the effort to secure warehouses, make connections with other agencies and secured visas and other permits. As described in Part 1, he and Kratz made the trip to Russia through the port of Sevastopol and reached the main town of Halbstadt in the Molotschna colony on October 13, 1920.<sup>2</sup> There they viewed the famine and hardships firsthand and talked with the local relief committees establishing needs and forming plans.

However, due to the Civil War and the advance of the Red forces, they were not able to get to Chortitza. Orie then went back to Constantinople, leaving Kratz to organize things in the Molotschna (sadly Kratz was soon arrested and disappeared).

On the ship journey back to Constantinople, Orie wrote in a letter to his wife,

"The whole past three weeks was one sad story of suffering, want, murder, rape and all those things that go with war. It would take books to tell all that we heard, and most of it too sad and horrible to try to remember."<sup>3</sup>

As the Reds then won the war and consolidated their victory, Orie organized relief activities among the Mennonite and other Russian refugees pouring into Constantinople and made unsuccessful efforts to find Kratz. He returned to Akron in Spring 1921, leaving the MCC famine mission in Russia in the hands of Alvin Miller.

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<sup>1</sup> "You can't mix business and the church," his father-in-law said. "You must give full time to the business or leave it." Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Miller,\\_Orie\\_O.\\_\(1892-1977\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Miller,_Orie_O._(1892-1977))

<sup>2</sup> The Orie O. Miller Diary, 1920-21, p. 58

<sup>3</sup> Letter dated October 23, 1920, as presented in My Calling to Fulfill, The Orie O. Miller Story, p 125

When Orie got home, he continued his life-long service to his church. He and his father-in-law eventually arrived at an arrangement whereby Orie gave about two-thirds time to the shoe business and one-third to the church. Church work centered on world relief, missions and education. He became executive secretary of MCC in 1935 and held that post for over 20 years.

In 1940, at age 48, Orie was ready to devote even more time to the church. He turned over the sales work to others he had trained but continued as director and secretary-treasurer of Miller Hess, was president of Highland Shoe Company of Akron and treasurer of A. N. Wolf Shoe Company of Denver, Pennsylvania.

In the church, his influence was felt in the vast programs of Mennonite relief and refugee resettlement, the Civilian Public Service program for conscientious objectors, the organization and growth of Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA), Menno Travel Service and Mennonite Mutual Aid, as well as numerous other Mennonite and inter-church causes. One example is from 1923 when Orie became the secretary-treasurer of the bluntly named 'Peace Problems Committee', which had succeeded the 'Military Problems Committee' of 1907-1919. He held the PPC post until 1953.

In a summary of Orie's long-term work for the church, biographer John Sharp noted:

"For 23 years, Miller simultaneously served as chief executive of both MCC and Eastern Mennonite missions—all without salary. Under his leadership both agencies expanded their work dramatically. For much of his life, he was a member and officer of a host of Mennonite boards and committees, as many as 25 at one time ...he also served on the boards of several ecumenical ministries. In his lifetime, he served on more than 60 boards commissions and committees. He seemed exceptionally suited to his times, but he would have been outstanding in any era."<sup>4</sup>

"Orie lived comfortably in the two worlds of business and church. Daily, he signaled his two roles by wearing a necktie (the attire of business) under a 'plain coat' (the mark of obedience to the church). He earned a living by selling shoes wholesale to stores throughout the East and Midwest and, with the advent of air travel, to the West Coast. As a partner in the company, he shared corporate profits. He drew generously from his personal wealth to support a wide variety of causes and people in need. As one who bridged these worlds, he had a passion for involving entrepreneurs and business leaders in mission projects."<sup>5</sup>

In 1958, at 65 years of age, Orie retired as secretary-treasurer of MCC and as secretary of Eastern Mennonite Missions. His wife Elta died in the same year. Orie continued his involvement in many church and charity causes and with the shoe company and remarried in 1960. However, fierce foreign competition resulted in the Miller Hess

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<sup>4</sup> John E. Sharp, *My Calling to Fulfill, The Orie O. Miller Story*, p. 10

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11

company filing for bankruptcy in 1984. Orié had to discontinue his practice of giving 30 percent of his income to the church.<sup>6</sup> Orié Miller died on January 10, 1977, aged 84.

In a way his MCC legacy continued as the Miller Hess shoe factory in Akron became the head office of MCC's Ten Thousand Villages. And, in an Ontario connection, one of Orié and Elta's sons John Miller, became the professor of Old Testament at Conrad Grebel College, a post he held for 23 years.

As MCC veteran Peter Dyck expressed at the funeral of Orié Miller, "Under his plain coat, the efficient, disciplined and all-business Orié Miller had a warm heart. Brother Orié was a humble giant of a man. He started enough programs to keep the rest of us occupied a lifetime carrying them out."<sup>7</sup>

## 2) Clayton Kratz

Clayton Kratz was born on November 5, 1896 at Blooming Glen, Pennsylvania. After attending West Chester Normal School, he was a schoolteacher for several terms, before going to Goshen College. He was an outstanding student at Goshen, a campus leader and president-elect of the student religious organization when he joined Orié Miller and Arthur Slagel on the first MCC relief team in Constantinople in 1920.

Kratz accompanied Miller on their first trip to the Mennonite areas, catching a ride with an American warship on October 3. The two men landed in Sevastopol Crimea and then proceeded by train to Melitopol just south of the Molotschna colony. Here they began their witness to the destruction and suffering that they would try to remedy. They visited Ohrlof and Halbstadt and a few other villages still under White Army control but were not able to reach the Chortitza colony (they got as far as Schoenweise) as the Red forces were surging southward. But for their Russian Mennonite hosts, "The knowledge that their brethren in America had learned of their plight and were doing all they could to help had a most heartening effect."<sup>8</sup>

On October 15 Miller returned to Sevastopol to arrange the transport of supplies (to be sent by Arthur Slagel from Constantinople) while Kratz stayed in Halbstadt to organize operations. But before any relief program could start, the Red Army overran Ukraine, forcing the White forces to retreat into Crimea.

The Russian Mennonites urged Kratz to flee, but he chose to stay as long as possible, believing that American relief workers (as neutrals) would be safe. He planned to leave the day before the White Army withdrew from Halbstadt but was trapped by an overnight advance of the Reds, who arrested him but then released him due to the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 347

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 361

<sup>8</sup> P.C. Hiebert and Orié O. Miller, *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine, 1919-1925*, p. 96

pleas of the local Mennonite leaders. Two weeks later he was again arrested and was last seen in the village of Fürstenwerder, about 10 miles to the east.

G.A. Peters, a Halbstadt teacher and pastor who was on the local relief committee reported that in his time under house arrest, Kratz,

“...spent much time reading the Bible he had carried with him. His calm resignation deeply impressed the family with whom he stayed. He spoke of his mother, his family, and his dearest friends. But he was not lacking for friendship or tender solicitude and love from those about him. They sought to do for him all that they would have hoped for their only son and brother, had he been in a far country staring death in the face. Then came a sudden summons to appear before the authorities. He went, accompanied by the man in whose home he had stayed. Both were treated gruffly. They were struck brutally. Clayton was put under arrest and taken away by the military tribunal.”<sup>9</sup>

Peters went out to search for Kratz, risking his life in the uncertain security situation. Peters gained an audience with an officer of the secret police and, after receiving substantial abuse was able to soften the officer by referring to the officer’s mother and how she would feel losing her son. Peters’ recollection of the words of the officer were:

“We shall not kill the American. That might be too severe, in spite of the fact that we do not especially fear America. We can also not free him. Frankly, I do not believe that he is a spy. The situation in which we find ourselves makes it necessary for us to act as we do. We shall send the prisoner to the chief of staff in Bachmut, from whence he will probably be sent by way of Kharkow to Moscow, and from there perhaps to Finland. Then he is free.”<sup>10</sup>

With those words, Peters was dismissed, but Clayton Kratz never did reappear. Peters believed that in view of the manner of his arrest and the attitude of the officials, Kratz was not executed but probably died of some disease before being released. (Peters eventually came to Canada in 1924 to Herbert Saskatchewan, then moving to Vineland, Ontario where he died in 1935.)

However, Kratz was not forgotten. Alvin Miller, director of the MCC relief program in Russia, made many enquiries in both Kharkov and Moscow, to determine what had happened to Kratz, but was unsuccessful. He issued a memorandum on October 10, 1921, to Soviet Foreign Minister Litvinov, and later a similar memorandum with Minister Rakovsky in Kharkov, but neither brought any results. MCC also worked with the American Consulate and with the American Relief Administration in Moscow as well as asking other relief organizations for help (such as the Quakers).

Miller noted that when the agreement between the American Relief Administration and the Soviet Government was made at Riga, it specifically stipulated that all Americans detained in Russia must be released and allowed to leave the country if they so

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 169

<sup>10</sup> P.C. Hiebert and Orië O. Miller, *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine, 1919-1925*, p. 352

desired.<sup>11</sup> This increased the hope that Clayton Kratz could be found and released, but this was not to be.

As Orié Miller stated in 1929:

“Clayton Kratz will probably never come home; and his resting place will probably never be known. No marble shaft marks the spot where his body returned to earth. But his name is graven (sic) on the hearts of thousands and thousands whom he came to help. Their children and children’s children will repeat the story of the Mennonite youth who came from far away America to save their lives and gave his own. ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ John 15:13.”<sup>12</sup>

Orié Miller considered Clayton Kratz a modern Mennonite martyr, MCC’s first. Kratz has been remembered in various ways: A memorial marker in the Blooming Glen Mennonite Church Cemetery in Pennsylvania; in 1971 Geraldine Gross Harder wrote the book: “*When Apples Are Ripe: The Story of Clayton Kratz*” and a dormitory at Goshen College bears his name, as does the Clayton Kratz Fellowship, a business and service organization based in Souderton, Pennsylvania.<sup>13</sup>

### 3) Arthur Slagel

Arthur W. Slagel was born on January 13, 1891, at Flanagan, Illinois. He graduated from Goshen College in 1919 and the following year taught music at Hesston College. Slagel was a member of the first MCC delegation sent to Russia, along with Orié Miller and Clayton Kratz in September 1920. While Kratz and Miller went to the Mennonite colonies in Russia, Slagel stayed behind in Constantinople spending one and one half years as a worker there, mainly organizing supplies for the upcoming relief effort in Russia and assisting refugees who had come to Turkey with the fall of the White army in South Russia and Crimea.

In early 1922 (through the efforts of Alvin Miller) the way opened for MCC to Soviet Russia, and Slagel accompanied the first shipment of supplies from Constantinople to the Mennonite settlements in Ukraine. While his main duties in Constantinople were as a purchasing and transportation agent; in Russia he with Alvin Miller, did the substantial work identifying areas of need and organizing feeding operations. As reported by Orié Miller, “The Quartermaster’s Department under the direction of Arthur Slagel, had charge of all relief supplies until used. The other departments called for these as needed. Much purchasing had to be done locally, which made Bro. Slagel’s work indispensable.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 166

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 170

<sup>13</sup> John E. Sharp, *My Calling to Fulfill, The Orié O. Miller Story*, p. 124

<sup>14</sup> P.C. Hiebert and Orié O. Miller, *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine, 1919-1925*, p. 108

From the central headquarters in the city of Aleksandrovsk (now Zaporizhia) in 1922 and 1923, Slagel supervised the feeding program for 75,000 people, including 60,000 Mennonites. Slagel was known for his efficient work in organizing the Aleksandrovsk district center, which became the feeding headquarters for all of Ukraine.<sup>15</sup>

Eventually, while Slagel remained in charge of the Aleksandrovsk office, C.E. Krehbiel took over the feeding operations in the Molotschna colony along with the adjacent scattered settlements. Slagel returned to the US in September 1923.

In 1925, Slagel married former MCC worker Vesta Zook.<sup>16</sup> Slagel joined an advertising/printing firm in Chicago and in 1932, the family moved to a farm near Topeka, Indiana. He died there on April 22, 1943. In 2020, 277 photos of the famine relief effort, taken by Arthur Slagel, were donated to the Mennonite Heritage Archive at CMU in Winnipeg, preserving the memory of this life-giving work.

#### **4) Alvin Miller**

Alvin J. Miller was born on December 11, 1883, on a farm near Grantsville, Maryland in the Allegheny Mountains. His father, Joel J. Miller, was for many years a minister and bishop in the Amish Mennonite Church. Both his father and mother were descendants of pioneer settlers in southwestern Pennsylvania and his early years were spent on the farm. School opportunities were limited, but Miller was studious and had access to books. After high school, he taught for two years in the public-school system.

At the age of twenty-two he went to the Maryland Collegiate Institute and then to Goshen College receiving his B. A. degree in 1911. He then earned a master's degree from Columbia University in 1912. After one year in Indiana as superintendent of schools, he returned to Columbia University for a year of graduate work and then taught in the departments of Psychology and Education at Wooster and Ohio Wesleyan Universities, and then at Kent State Normal College (later Kent State) in Ohio.

In the summer of 1915, Miller traveled in Europe studying the social psychology of the early period of World War One. He volunteered for relief and reconstruction service in Europe, and in 1919 joined other Mennonites working in France with the Friends Service Committee (Quakers) under the American Red Cross. Miller was a member of a delegation of Mennonite relief workers who called on the heads of two American organizations in Paris: Colonel Bicknell of the American Red Cross and Herbert Hoover

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<sup>15</sup> P.C. Hiebert and Orie O. Miller, *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine, 1919-1925*, p. 201

<sup>16</sup> Vesta Zook Slagel, of Topeka Kansas, also a graduate of Goshen College, was a professor at Goshen as well as the Dean of Women when she left for relief work in Constantinople in 1921 to supervise the Children's Home for Orphans for over a year. She returned to Goshen College before marrying Arthur Slagel. *Ibid.* p.363

of the American Relief Administration, to discuss possible fields of service for a Mennonite relief organization.

When the Mennonites decided to carry on relief activities in their own name, he was sent from France in 1919 as a member of a committee to investigate needs and possibilities in central and eastern Europe. On this journey, which led through Germany and Austria and extended into southern Russia, the first contact between an American Mennonite relief organization and the Russian Mennonites was made. In 1920 he again went to the south of Russia and Crimea under the American Red Cross during the cholera epidemic there, also maintaining the contact between the Mennonites of Russia and America.

In the spring of 1921, Miller was commissioned by MCC to enter Soviet Russia through the south in order to organize relief operations and to try to locate Clayton Kratz, the Mennonite relief worker who had disappeared the previous autumn. He was unsuccessful on both fronts.

In the fall of that year after making connections with Quaker relief officials and the American Relief Administration (ARA) he re-entered Russia from the north, going directly to Moscow, where he overcame many challenges and difficulties in making a contract with the head of the Russian Central Commission for Combating Famine to allow relief work by American and Dutch Mennonites. A short time later he negotiated a similar contract with the Ukrainian Soviet government in Kharkov.

Miller served as Director of MCC's American Mennonite Relief (AMR) in Russia from 1921 until the mission ended in 1926. From 1921 to 1923 the AMR organization was affiliated with the broader ARA and Miller served as the Mennonite representative on the staff of the Director of the American Relief Administration in Russia. After the ARA left Russia in the summer of 1923, Miller carried on the work under his original contract with the Soviet authorities.

Interestingly, although Alvin Miller was key in getting access to the Soviet Union so MCC could provide famine relief and was the head of the entire (successful) program for over 5 years, little has been written about him. For instance, the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia On-line has no entry on Alvin Miller with the only real information on him and his service found in the MCC History of the Famine Relief effort published in 1929. However, on the website of the Casselman River Area Amish and Mennonite Historians, there is a copy of their July 2000 newsletter which includes an entry on Alvin Miller. It notes that Miller returned to Kent State University to teach in 1935 and then in the 1940s he became the executive director the Baltimore office of

National Conference of Christians and Jews. He died in 1981 at the age of 97 and was buried near his birthplace. He never married.<sup>17</sup>

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I should also mention here that I have only profiled 4 of all the American Mennonites who were key in this famine relief effort along with the three Dutch Mennonites who organized aid from Holland at that time. In addition to Orié Miller, A. J. Miller, Clayton Kratz and Arthur Slagel, the other important Mennonite relief workers in Russia included G. G. Hiebert (Manitoba then Reedley, California), P.C Hiebert (Hillsboro, Kansas), D. R. Hoepfner (Hillsboro, Kansas), D.M. and Barbara Hofer (South Dakota), C.E. Krehbiel (Summerfield, Illinois), Daniel Schroeder (Hillsboro, Kansas), P.H. Unruh (Goessel, Kansas), and H. C. Yoder (Smithville, Ohio). The Dutch Mennonite Relief Committee leaders were Jacob Koekebakker, F.C. Fleischer and R.J.C. Willink.

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Harold Thiessen  
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<sup>17</sup> <https://casselmanhistorians.files.wordpress.com/2017/09/july-2000-historian.pdf>