

No Lasting Home

← A Year in the Paraguayan Wilderness →



Emmy Barth with a foreword by Alfred Neufeld

NO LASTING HOME

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

NO LASTING HOME

A Year in the Paraguayan Wilderness

EMMY BARTH

Foreword by Alfred Neufeld



THE PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com

© 2009 Plough Publishing House
All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-0-87486-945-3

18 17 16 15 14 13 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Acknowledgments

Cover paintings by Victor Crawley (1899–1991). Photographs on pages 26, 40, 45, 46 are reprinted courtesy of the Mennonite Church USA Archives in North Newton, Kansas. Photographs on pages 29, 31, 33, 36, 41 are reprinted courtesy of the Mennonite Archives in Filadelfia, Paraguay. All other photographs are from the archives of the Plough Publishing House.

All diaries and letters quoted in this book are from the archives of the Plough Publishing House, unless otherwise noted, and are used with permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barth, Emmy, 1961-

No lasting home : a year in the Paraguayan wilderness / Emmy Barth;
foreword by Alfred Neufeld.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-87486-945-3

1. Bruderhof Communities--Paraguay--History. I. Title.

BX8129.B635P379 2009

289.7'892--dc22

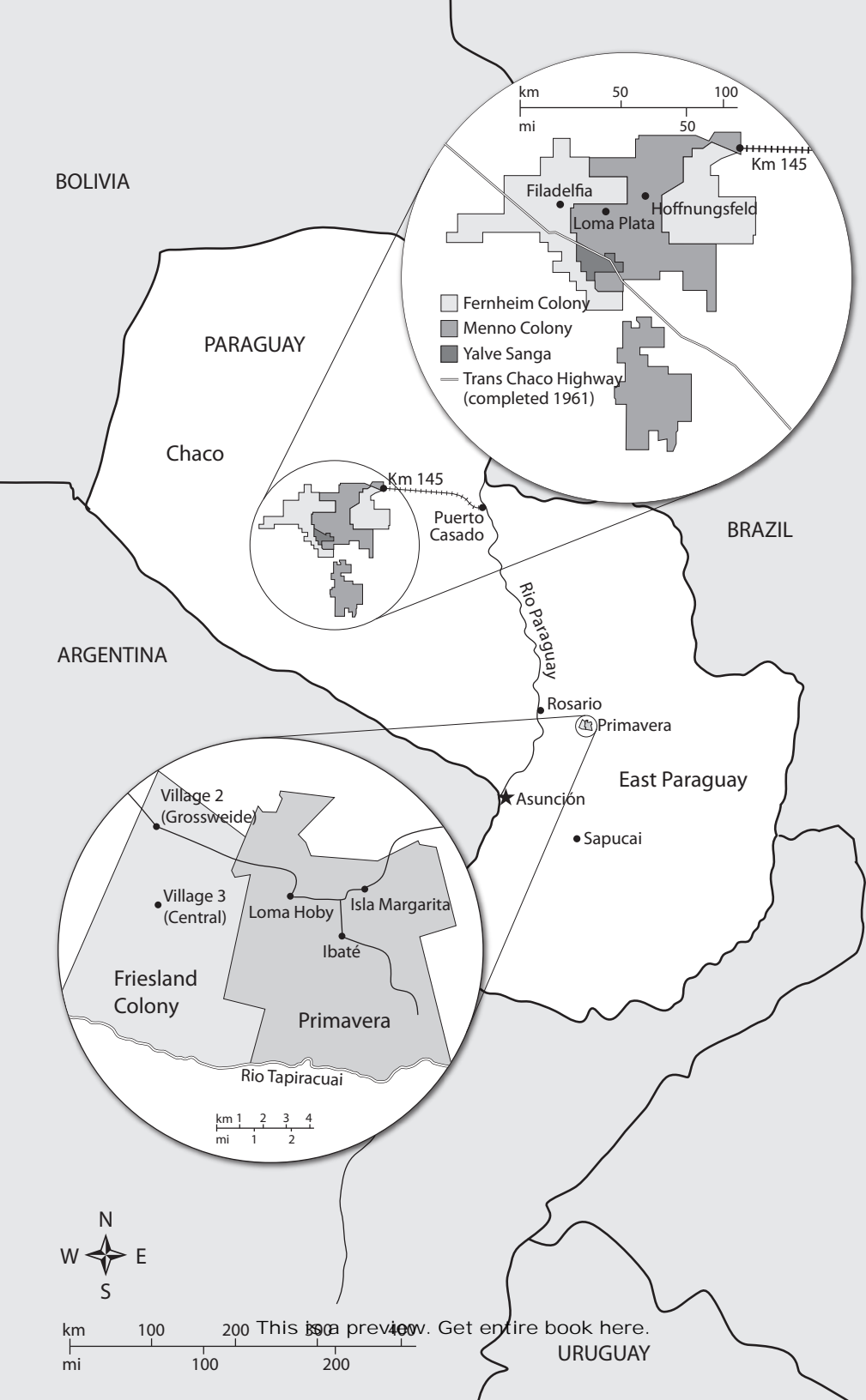
2009015768

Printed in the U.S.A.

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

*In grateful memory
of all those Paraguayan pioneers,
Bruderhof and Mennonite alike,
who left homeland and loved ones
for the sake of their faith
and laid down their lives
for us, the living.*





This is a preview. Get entire book here.

THE GRAN CHACO, a region central to the telling of this story, is a grand plain west of the Paraguay River and east of the Andes. It lies mainly within Paraguay, but extends into Bolivia and Argentina as well. Roughly 250,001 mi² (647,500 km²) in size, it consists of three parts: the Alto Chaco, whose highlands meet the Andes and are extremely dry and sparsely vegetated; the Chaco Boreal to the east, with less severe aridity and higher thorn trees; and finally (moving farther to the east) the Bajo Chaco, a savanna-like territory dotted with palms, quebracho trees, and high grass.

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Alfred Neufeld</i>	<i>xv</i>
1 Voyage	1
2 Up the River	17
3 Mennonites in the Chaco	27
4 Paraguayan Nazis?	39
5 Chaco	49
6 The Search for a Home	57
7 Regrouping	76
8 First Losses	99
9 Primavera	113
10 Christine	135
11 Building Up	145
12 Repentance	157
13 Felix	166
14 Christopher	171
15 Christmas	176
<i>Appendix 1: Transatlantic Crossings</i>	<i>186</i>
<i>Appendix 2: Deaths</i>	<i>193</i>
<i>Appendix 3: Mennonite Peace Declaration</i>	<i>195</i>
<i>Endnotes</i>	<i>199</i>
<i>Further reading</i>	<i>200</i>

T H E Q U E S T

*To meet the challenge of the sun
Awake and gird thyself my soul,
Put forth upon the outward way
To seek the shining goal.*

*Go seek the land of Brotherhood,
Go seek the city on a hill,
One love shall bind thee to all those
Who seek with heart and will.*

*And though the sun climb up the sky,
And hot salt sweat pour down thy face,
Turn not aside, for pause or shade.
Expect no resting place.*

*Fear not the sun shall beat thee down,
Though heart shall faint and limbs shall fail,
But look ahead with eager eyes
The far and fiery trail.*

*And joyful journey on, until,
One with thy brothers in the quest,
Thou build the city on the hill
Where all shall find true rest.*

P H I L I P B R I T T S
March 1941, mid-Atlantic

FOREWORD

WHEN MY FATHER-IN-LAW, Dr. Wilhelm Kaethler, died, he left numerous papers that needed sorting. A surgeon in Paraguay for most of his adult life, he had worked with Cyril Davies and Ruth Land—two Bruderhof physicians—in Friesland and Primavera. (His wife, my mother-in-law, Frieda Siemens, was the daughter of Nikolai Siemens, long-time editor of the *Menno-Blatt*, and a close friend of Emmy Arnold and her sons.) Among the old papers, I found an anniversary edition of *Der Pflug*, the Bruderhof quarterly, in which Emmy recalls the history of their community. Unbelievably, it had been published in Primavera. How could a publication of such quality come out of our poor country, and so long ago, I wondered?

I eagerly read through the little journal. I knew the community's history, for I had read Ulrich Egger's book, *Community for Life* (1985). But these firsthand reports by the original founders of the Bruderhof appealed far more to my emotions. Later, going to Friesland and talking with my mother-in-law, I learned many remarkable things from her memories of the *Hutterer* or *Bruderhöfler* or *Barbudos* ("bearded ones"), as they were known here during their twenty-year stay in Paraguay. It is a fascinating history, though virtually unknown by most young Mennonites of our country.

Several years later, while in Akron, Pennsylvania, mutual acquaintances at the MCC (Mennonite Central Committee) led me into direct contact with the Bruderhof by means of visits to Woodcrest and Maple Ridge, two of their communities in upstate New York. Those were unforgettable days. Here were an amazing group of people, many of them born and raised in Paraguay, and several still speaking good Spanish! One had done a nurse's training in Asunción (at the same school my wife Wilma attended). Another remembered dancing the fox trot at the Colegio Internacional. Still another reminded me of Behage, the well-known arts and crafts store in Asunción, where the community used to sell its wooden turnery and I used to go shopping. And there was *Frau Doktor* Ruth Land, now in her nineties, but still with the most vivid memories.

On another visit (this time to Sannerz, Germany, where the Bruderhof has again settled in its very first home), a member of the community showed me a copy of an old *Friedensmanifest*, or peace manifesto. Drawn up at the 1936 Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam, this document was signed by Mennonite leaders such as Harold S. Bender, Orie Miller, C. F. Klassen, and C. N. Hiebert – and by Emmy Arnold and Hans Zumpe of the Bruderhof.* A radical condemnation of militarism and war, signed under the gathering clouds of what developed into World War II, this manifesto immediately recalled the famous Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church of 1934, in which Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and others condemned

*See Appendix 3

the cult of the *Führer* and the secular messianism of the National Socialists.

All these threads and more have come together for me in this book, especially in the chapter “Paraguayan Nazis?” where Emmy Arnold is quoted as saying “*Lieber Hakenwurm als Hakenkreuz!*” which translates as “better hookworm, than hooked cross (swastika).” Reading this section of the book, I remembered my own father, Peter K. Neufeld, who through the witness of Eberhard and Emmy Arnold’s Bruderhof, and through the strong spiritual support of Nikolai Siemens, underwent conversion from a pro-German militant to a pointed opponent of the Nazi movement then growing in Fernheim. (Siemens and my father had been secretaries of the Unión Germanica in the Chaco, but were formally expelled because of their anti-Nazi views.) Looking back, it seems that my father might have drawn inspiration from the 1936 Amsterdam peace manifesto. Clearly, love to one’s enemies and the sharing of material goods, as well as the radical discipleship of Jesus within a pilgrim church, were central pillars of his faith until the end of his life.

Emmy Barth has done a wonderful job uncovering old documents and bringing to life the Bruderhof’s exodus from England and its first year in Paraguay. Among the sources she sent me while researching this book were two letters from the Bruderhof, written in England in 1940, reminding the Mennonites of the memorandum they had co-signed in Amsterdam in 1936. Not only a manifesto but a covenant of mutual help, the statement had included a promise to aid

one another, if either branch of the Anabaptist family ever suffered persecution because of its commitment to the way of Jesus.

One year later, Hitler's Gestapo was to expel the Bruderhof from Germany; three years after that, now on the run from England, they were seeking refuge in South America with the help of Orié Miller and the MCC. This book relates their extraordinary story.

Alfred Neufeld
Asunción, Paraguay

VOYAGE

We must be ready always to step out into the unknown at the call of God—as Abraham did. Let us be a pilgrim church on the move, trusting God to lead us where he wants.

MAUREEN BURN

TRAUTEL GROANED and stumbled dizzily back to her bed, fighting nausea as the ship rolled under her feet. In the basket next to her bed, her baby stirred. Felix was only five weeks old and had cried most of the night. He was quiet now, but she herself could not sleep. What lay ahead for her little one? “God, why are you leading us into the danger-ridden tropics? What sacrifices will be demanded of us?” She remembered the fear that had clutched her heart in Liverpool as she crossed the gangplank onto the ship, little Felix held tight in her arms. She felt that the lives of all of them were on a razor’s edge, suspended between life and death, heaven and earth. “Will I ever touch solid ground again? Will the demon of war let this big ship pass



Operated by England's famed Blue Star Line, which took passengers to and from South America from 1927 until 1972, the *Andalusia Star* was torpedoed off West Africa in 1942.

unscathed?" She pulled herself together. "Do not question, my soul, but trust. God is leading us out of a war-torn country. He will protect us and our children on the ocean and also in the strange land we are travelling to."

It was the end of November 1940. They were on a luxury liner, the *Andalusia Star*, one of the few passenger ships to dare the submarine-infested ocean. It had no second-class berths, so the eighty refugees she was travelling with had been forced to pay for first-class tickets.

Leo and Trautel Dreher had left Switzerland eleven years earlier to join the Bruderhof, a Christian community then located in Germany. Little could they have known what taking this step would mean: how they would soon have to flee Hitler's minions for England, and then England, too, for the sake of their convictions. Now they



Trautel Dreher (center) with Gertie Vigar (left) and a group of children in England, ca. 1940. Trautel came to the Bruderhof with her fiancé Leo in 1929.

were on their way to Paraguay, that mysterious, land-locked, little country in the backwoods of South America, with six small children.

Marianne Zimmermann was on the ship too, with her husband Kurt and their four children. She kept a journal for her children to read when they grew up:

With this voyage, a new period of our community's history begins. We've taken leave of a beautiful home and are now preparing for a new life. I would like to write something for you, my beloved children, about this trip, which will have great significance. The goal, the castle and the city in which Jesus lives, is and remains the same, even if there are many

unknown paths before us. We must look unwaveringly to Jesus; Peter was able to walk safely on the water as long as he looked to Jesus.

Phyllis Rabbitts, a young English nurse and midwife who had come to the community only a few months earlier, wrote a letter to her family describing the departure. She was to follow on a later voyage to Paraguay:

The idea of a whole community being transferred from one country to another in wartime was something one could not grasp. It seemed too great a miracle. We had realized for many months the insecurity of our position in England as there was so much hate growing in the hearts of the general populace. This could be understood because we had many German members; also the pacifism of our English members roused a bitter spirit in nationalistic minds.

Although national and local government officials were tolerant and understanding, our economic position was getting acute because of the local hostility, which crippled our business. Also the curfew affecting our “alien” members curtailed considerably our sending out brothers for mission. The church was in peril and had to be saved, and there was a definite leading from God that we should leave the country.

Following this leading from God was not easy. We had a well built-up Bruderhof – the dwelling houses were still quite new, and the dining/meeting room was brand new and beautiful in its simplicity. The laundry with its modern machines had also not long been set in motion and was a tremendous boon to those who had known what it was to wash everything by hand in difficult conditions. The new baths and

toilets were also a very welcome achievement. In fact, all over the whole Bruderhof one could see the fruits of four to five years' struggle and hard labor.

But now the time had come to lay down our tools and leave all this and to pick them up again in another country that we could not choose for ourselves.

Having so many young children and several elderly and infirm members, all this was far from easy, for no one could foresee this kind of journey in wartime. Twenty-two babies were born in the year 1940 (one was stillborn) and twenty in the previous year, so there were many very young children taken to Paraguay.

After a long seeking and waiting to know the will of God concerning us, the first group left the Cotswold Bruderhof to build up afresh in a hither-to unknown (to us) land—the Chaco region of Paraguay! It was with sad and heavy hearts that we saw our brothers and sisters and children depart from us just a month before Christmas 1940. Paraguay seemed such a long way off, and between there and England lay the dangerous ocean, where ships were being either sunk or bombed almost daily.

The day of departure was a memorable one. We breakfasted together in our beautiful new dining room. We talked and sang together and felt the warmth of fellowship. Soon the coaches came that were to take the first group to the [train] station. Those who could accompanied them and sang songs at the station as the train took its departure. Would we ever see them again? How long would it be until we were all reunited once more? For what purpose were we being led out of England to Paraguay? Many such questions filled our thoughts. But deep down in our hearts was a strong feeling



Departure from the Cotswold Bruderhof, Ashton-Keynes, England, November 1940.

that ere long this reunion would come and together we would continue the fight and struggle so that God's will might be done through us, wherever that might be.

The going away of this first large group left a big gap in our midst, and we longed increasingly for reunion. Yet if it were not to be, we were prepared to remain where we were and carry on the witness of a life of brotherhood—even to death.

On board the *Andalucia Star* the passengers found their cabins and settled in. The voyage would take several weeks. Already the first evening several were seasick and did not make it to dinner. The next morning hardly anyone was able to get up. Most of the children were sick, and big strong men had to be encouraged to come up onto the deck, where they lay on deck chairs, white as chalk. Emmy, the eldest in the group, encouraged the men to rise to the adventure. Though fighting seasickness herself, she



Emmy Arnold (1884–1980), widow of Eberhard Arnold and co-founder of the Bruderhof, at the Cotswold Bruderhof shortly before the voyage.

roused them: “Come on! Get up and take a little walk. We are pioneers!”

Emmy was *Mama* to many of the adults and *Oma* (grandmother) to all the children. It was she and her late husband, Eberhard Arnold, who had initially formed the community now known as the Bruderhof in a small village in Germany, in 1920. Amid the economic and political rubble left by the nation’s crushing defeat in World War I, they had turned their backs on middle-class life and sought

to take literally Jesus' demands in the Sermon on the Mount. Within months, they had been joined by other like-minded seekers from across Europe and from many walks of life. Seventeen years later, in 1937, the community had been forced out of Germany. As Nazi records explain, the community's very existence was a threat since it "represents a world view totally opposed to National Socialism. Its members reject the race laws...and oppose the institutions of the Third Reich." After surrounding the community's farm and imprisoning its leaders (mercifully, all were later released), the Nazis gave them forty-eight hours to leave the country. The community fled to England by way of Holland. Now they had been uprooted once more.

With her sense of humor and a solid, simple faith, Emmy encouraged distraught mothers, too: "Come, let's walk around the deck," and started singing an old hiking song, "We want to travel round the globe just like Columbus did, for people are so very dull in this, our latitude!"

Every meal was served in the ship's five-star restaurant. Many of the group had never eaten in such a grand style. What should they order from the fancy menu, and would the children eat it anyway? Which knife should be used for what? A four-year-old, Johannes, tried to eat with three forks at once; and Trautel's son, Josua, spilled his milk on the carpet. She found herself longing for a simple stew.

The ship seemed to be travelling north, although no one spoke about the route it was taking, for reasons of security. The weather was cold and stormy—chairs fell over, and dishes slid off the tables. A child fell out of his bunk and



Edith Boecker Arnold (shown here with her daughter Mirjam on the deck of the Andalusia Star) left her studies at Tübingen to join the Bruderhof in 1932; she married Hardy Arnold, a fellow student, soon afterward.

bumped his forehead. Emmy's daughter-in-law Edith (she was married to Hardy Arnold) fell over backward while feeding her daughter Mirjam.

Five days into the crossing, Edith, who had been feeling sick, suffered a miscarriage. Heavy-hearted – not only over her own loss, but on account of the other young mothers who had little ones or were expecting babies – she turned her thoughts to God and reminded herself why they were here: they were on a quest for peace, justice, and community and could not let the hardships of war obstruct their path. Writing later to the remnant of the community that had stayed behind in England, she explained:

I have the feeling that our church will be faced with a struggle for faith in the near future. The powers of evil are especially active just now; they will not suffer the arising of a Zion, of a city of peace. The powers of evil will attack us in different ways in Paraguay than in England, but it is the same fight. Yet wherever the kingdom of God is revealed, demons yield! We need the power of a faith that is completely different from pious feeling. The faith that is required of us does not come from our own strength—our own strength is even a hindrance to faith. We cannot overcome evil; we are too weak. Only God can do this.

The First of Advent (four Sundays before Christmas), traditionally marks the beginning of the holiday season in Germany, and the Bruderhof group made the most of it. After breakfast in the ship's dining room, they gathered in the salon. To everyone's surprise, several sisters had decorated it with evergreen branches and a wreath they had brought with them from England. As each child was given a candle to light, the group broke into songs, Margrit accompanying them on her violin. In the evening the adults met again. Emmy's son, Hardy, read from the Gospel of Luke, carols were sung, and punch was passed around.

While such gatherings for celebration and worship strengthened and united the group, they were almost always accompanied by reminders of the very different atmosphere surrounding them. On this occasion, for example, curious passengers kept peeping in at them through the windows of the smoking room. Further, the general mood on the ship was most depressing: passengers and crew were

very much aware of the danger of submarines and warships and, for the first few days, danger from airplanes. Defense guns and three machine guns were constantly manned, and blackout precautions strictly observed. To avoid being followed, the ship's course was changed constantly and without warning. For the first week everyone had to carry life belts at all times. Every three or four days there was a lifeboat drill. Each of the community's children was paired with an adult who was to make sure they got in the lifeboats. Each child also wore an ID card around his or her neck in case of separation from their parents.

On the whole, the ship's crew and stewards were friendly, especially to the children. For the adults, getting to know their fellow passengers was a little more difficult, if only because of language barriers. There were Jewish refugees from Poland, Russia, Czechoslovakia, and Germany, as well as political refugees from France and England. A few connections were established: Hardy struck up a friendship with an Argentinean banker and his wife, who were particularly concerned that the children get good milk and food once in Paraguay and advised them to take a few cows upriver. A Brazilian diplomat suggested that Brazil would be more favorable than Paraguay and offered to write a letter of recommendation to the immigration department. The ship's doctor, a jovial and easy-going man, offered the travelers lectures on tropical diseases and hygiene.

One thing everyone seemed to enjoy was the community's singing—whether it was Christmas carols or folk songs to cheer up those who were seasick. Singing had always



Bruderhof passengers on the Andaluca Star's dangerous transatlantic crossing fought cabin fever and fear by folk dancing on the deck.

been an integral part of the community life, and at sea this was all the more the case.

Occupying the children—and keeping them away from the railings—was a full-time job, and because ping pong and other such activities were difficult to play on the rolling ship, playtime songs and circle games were popular.

Several of the group took up studying Spanish. Meanwhile, small knots of brothers dreamed of the building up that lay ahead. Planning a school, a kitchen, workshops, and gardens, they discussed everything from

potential sources of income to how they might reestablish a publishing house.

The weather was growing warmer as the ship headed south. The sickle moon was now a cradle in the sky, no longer upright. It was strange to see new stars. Had they crossed the equator? Large flocks of white birds skimmed the water – then swooped, plunging into the ocean. (They weren't birds at all, the passengers soon realized, but flying fish.)

One night the group gave a Christmas concert for the other passengers. They had worked hard for days, rehearsing German and English carols. Margrit, Jan, and Marianne even played a violin trio. It felt a little awkward, singing about a poor baby in a manger to an audience sitting in soft armchairs, in formal evening dress, smoking cigarettes. But the audience enjoyed the music and afterwards seemed friendlier.

Now the heat became oppressive. Lightweight, light-colored pants were being sold on the ship, so a pair was bought for each of the men. On the deck, two playpens were set up in the shade for the youngest children, and the babies' bassinets were lined up next to them. Some families even began sleeping on the deck, which was cooler than the cabins. It was a beautiful way to fall asleep, too, with stars and moon twinkling above the watery expanse and the black smokestack of the ship standing out against the magnificent night sky.

On December 12 land was sighted. Far on the horizon, the mountains of Rio de Janeiro were visible. Everyone

rushed to the deck. As they entered the bay, they saw beautiful green slopes on either side, covered with palms and yellow mimosa. The *Andalucia Star* anchored two or three miles out. Policemen and customs officers came out in small boats and boarded the ship. Here was a chance to send mail to the beloved ones left in England. And there was a letter from Hans Meier!

Hans had left England the previous August with Guy Johnson, a young lawyer who had recently joined the community. At a time when the Luftwaffe was raining bombs on London and Coventry, the very existence of the Bruderhof in England was increasingly viewed as a security risk, and so the two brothers had been sent to New York to research possibilities for emigration. There, with the help of sympathetic Quakers, Mennonites, South Dakota Hutterites (and a handful of notable individuals, including Eleanor Roosevelt), they sought in vain for asylum in the United States or Canada. They also inquired at numerous other embassies, including those of New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, and Jamaica. But with all of Europe at war, and North America on the brink of it, no one wanted to touch a multi-national group—especially not a countercultural one with strong pacifist leanings. In desperation, the two men had turned to the Mennonites, a Christian group of similar heritage and beliefs. In 1936, members of the Bruderhof had joined the Mennonite World Conference in Holland, and had co-signed a statement affirming their nonresistant position and a promise of mutual help. Orie Miller, then executive secretary of



Bruderhof member Hans Meier, a Swiss engineer, was briefly imprisoned by the Nazis in 1937. In August 1940 (the date of this picture) the community sent him to New York to research the possibility of emigration from Europe.

the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), had helped Mennonite refugees from Russia and was willing to help the Bruderhof group too. He acted quickly, speaking directly with the Paraguayan embassy in Washington. Before long, the Bruderhof was granted permission to enter Paraguay with the same privileges given to the Mennonites: freedom of religion, freedom to run their own schools, and exemption from military service. MCC would help them find land and provide initial financial support.

Now Hans's letter was read aloud. To the great joy of the assembled passengers, which included both his and

Guy's wives, the two brothers had already made it to South America and were working out the last obstacles to immigration for the arriving group. Guy would meet them here in Rio, and Hans in Buenos Aires.

