Fall 2011


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Joanita Kant’s Gentle People is an excellent case study of South Dakota’s Rockport Hutterite Colony. The book includes in-depth description and analysis of the lifestyle of Rockport Colony residents and covers people of all ages and interests. There are numerous helpful photographs, both contemporary and historical.

Members of the Rockport Colony belong to a religious society that has practiced “community of goods” for nearly five centuries. The book not only introduces the reader to the deep-seated beliefs and practices of members, but also provides important sociological analysis supported by helpful figures and maps, including population pyramids, floor plans, and colony branching charts.

The Hutterites have indeed created an important alternative and communitarian society, which citizens of the modern world might learn much from, especially in terms of economy of scale and conflict management. Kant gives us a good picture of how different life is in a small community where residents are tied to each other by social, economic, and religious bonds.

Her book, however, also contains an abundance of factual errors, which greater attention to secondary sources might have forestalled. On page 17, for example, we are told that the unnamed Hutterite village where communal life was resurrected in Ukraine in the 1850s was located about 200 miles “northwest” of Odessa. Hutterthal was in fact located primarily east and a bit north of Odessa. On the same page, Darius Walter is listed as the leader of the Scheromet Hutterite village, when in fact Michael Waldner (Walter’s competitor) was the leader of that group. Kant suggests that there were three Hutterite villages in south Ukraine at the time of immigration to the United States; there were in fact five.

Kant claims that only in “rare cases” (p. 10) do Hutterites pursue post-secondary education; since the mid-1990s, however, over 100 Schmiedeleut (Group One) Hutterites have graduated with bachelor’s degrees from Brandon University (Manitoba). Kant says (on p. 18) that after settling in Dakota Territory, the non-communal Hutterian Prairieleut were “no longer members of the Hutterite faith.” This is not the view of the Prairieleut, and their well-known leader Paul Tschetter (mentioned twice for other reasons in the book), who formed the same kind of Hutterite churches in which they had worshiped in Ukraine. In one of these congregations (Neu Hutterthal) the traditional sermons were the only homilies read into the 1940s, an issue I discuss in detail in The Prairie People: Forgotten Anabaptists (1999).