The story of Mennonites in Ukraine can be divided into two eras: 1789-1943 and 1994 to the present. The story of Mennonites arriving in the valley of the Khortitsa in 1789 and the development of subsequent settlements is well known. That story, the old one, virtually came to an end with the relocation or deportation of Mennonites in 1943. The number of Mennonites who remained were a handful. Mennonite institutions disappeared. Mennonite buildings remained but often were reconfigured for different use. The many contributions Mennonites made to the region were buried under the hostility to all things Germanic.

I was one of many tourists who traveled to what is now Ukraine in 1989 to participate in celebrating the bicentennial of the original settlements. I think for most of us who came to the Zaporozhye region, where the central celebrations were held, it was easy to think that we were part of the last passing of the Mennonite presence. We had come to look at the past, but not with any sense that a new story was about to begin. The small remnant of Mennonites living in the region were invisible. Living under the shadow of the Soviet state they were lost to each other.

And yet today there are six Mennonite congregations in central and southern Ukraine: Zaporozhye, Kutuzovka (formerly Petershagen), Balkova (formerly Fuerstenwerder), Nikolaipoli (formerly Nikolaifeld), Morozovka (formerly Hochfeld) and Kherson. Today Ukrainians and Mennonites from various countries are working together in effective partnerships with humanitarian agencies, with churches and church associations, with universities and archives, with agricultural cooperatives and small businesses. Men-
Mennonites are again able to empower people who have long suffered and for whom despair is an ever-present temptation, to provide compassion for the elderly and indigent, to bring medical care to those in need, to articulate different social practices, to encourage new directions in scholarship and historical understanding.

That Mennonites would make a reappearance in Ukraine is ironic in some ways and not at all surprising in other ways. For while Mennonites were scattered across the vast stretches of the Tsarist empire nowhere did they make quite the contribution to the evolution of the social system as in what is present-day Ukraine. It is the longer history that made possible the new history. The past is frequently prologue in Ukraine it certainly was.

"That Mennonites would make a reappearance in Ukraine is ironic in some ways and not at all surprising in others."

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Ukraine as an independent country in 1991 is the beginning of the short history. In the decade that followed a series of beginnings, re-emergences and initiatives took place that created this renewed Mennonite presence. The origin for these initiatives belong to the small remnant of Mennonites who remained or returned to the Zaporozhye region, to the Mennonite diaspora in North America and Europe and to Ukrainians in search of their history. While other initiatives took place across Ukraine, in the Zaporozhye region the four essential ones might be described as churchly, humanitarian, academic and memorialization.

Churchly

The beginnings of the Zaporozhye Mennonite Church is the first event in the rebirth story. In 1994 a collection of people began meeting as a congregation. They had found each other through “Wiedergeburt,” a German cultural society. These were Mennonite people left behind in the relocation of the 1940s or those who returned following the 1957 amnesty of political prisoners of World War II. The initial meetings involved just a handful of people. Over time the congregation has grown and in recent years numbered approximately seventy-five people, some of whom have Mennonite ancestral ties. The pastoral staff, and other forms of support, through most of these thirteen years has largely come from the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and Mennonite Church Canada. While it remains small and struggling it signals the endurance and perseverance of a people under the most unimaginable odds.

In 1998 the villagers in Kutuzovka (formerly Petershagen), in the Molochka colony, approached

The leadership and support of this conversation has come from various Aussiedler communities in Germany."

the Mennonite congregation of Zaporozyh indicating that they knew that the church building in the village had been a Mennonite church. They were interested in starting a new congregation and thought it should be a Mennonite church. So the Zaporozhye congregation, particularly Frank Dyck the interim minister from Alberta, began working toward the establishment of a second congregation.

Today that congregation of nearly two hundred persons meets in the restored and renovated church building that was originally built in 1892. The leadership and support of this congregation has come from various Aussiedler communities in Germany. The congregation in Balkova/Fuerstenwerder is somewhat a daughter congregation of the Kutuzov/Petershagen church, and those in Nikolaiopole/Nikolaifeld and Morozovka/Hochfeld are daughter congregations of the Zaporozyh church.

Humanitarian

The humanitarian activity accelerated in 1997 when Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) relocated its Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) offices from Moscow to Zaporozyh. It was a coming home, a return to the region where MCC had its birth. It signaled a renewed commitment to Ukraine and to the descendants of people among whom Mennonites had lived and worked. MCC is involved in a variety of projects: material aid, financial and personnel support for an orphanage, conflict resolution training, a small business loan and investment program, community development projects and assistance to several theological training institutions. The MCC activity takes place in diverse locations in Ukraine and Russia.

"It was a coming home, a return to the region where MCC had its birth."

In 2001 the Mennonite Centre opened in Molochansk (formerly Halbstadt). Molochansk has a larger intact collection of Mennonite buildings than any other village in the Molochanka settlement. One of those buildings – the former girls school– now houses the Mennonite Centre, giving the village an impressive Mennonite presence.

The Centre carries on a variety of programs in Molochansk—educational, youth, senior activities, community development and recently also has begun working at the revitalization of small farms. Perhaps its most significant work has been various forms of medical assistance. It has renovated clinics and small hospitals and provided many with used medical equipment (from beds to microscopes and ex-ray machines.) It subsidizes small clinics so that they can dispense pharmaceuticals to needy patients. On several occasions the Centre hosted a medical conference in which North American and Ukrainian specialists trained staffs of rural hospitals.

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relationships. They are participatory, egalitarian, fair, judicious, and deal with all in respectful and compassionate ways. Furthermore they increasingly have access to governmental officials who realize that new practices are needed in the institutions that serve disadvantaged and disabled people, and are looking for outside assistance to introduce these new practices.

Academic
Since the mid-1990s there has been an ongoing conversation and development of a collegial partnership between some North American and Ukrainian/Russian academics and archivists. Early in the 1990s historians out of the Mennonite diaspora recognized that archival sources hitherto closed might become available and went in search of them. Harvey Dyck, Professor Emeritus, at the University of Toronto, was at the forefront of developing these relationships.

The Ukrainian side of the story originated in 1997 when the Dnipropetrovsk National University, under the direction of Professor Svetlana Bobyleva, opened an Institute for Ukrainian-German Studies. The Institute symbolizes the need for Ukrainians to take a fresh, post-Soviet look at their history. Historically, Ukraine had a rich ethnic and religious diversity. That heterogeneity, after being initially embraced by the Soviets, suffered a different fate under the historical revisionism of the 1930s. For historians visiting archives in the Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporozhye region the largest archival collections of Germanic peoples were those about Mennonites. The Tsarist bureaucracy required foreign colonists to provide many different kinds of reports. In addition Mennonites were record keepers of the first order. So historians going to the archives rediscovered the role that Mennonites played in the evolution of their society. Some of the early fruits of the multi-national conversation about the Mennonite story in Ukraine appeared in 1999. “Khortitsa ’99: Mennonites in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union” was a series of events that took place in Zaporozhye during the last week of May 1999. It included an academic conference, a museum exhibit and the unveiling of two memorial markers. The academic conference brought together scholars from Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Canada and the United States. Fourteen papers at the conference were written by younger historians from Russia and Ukraine. Seven of those were from persons associated with the Institute for Ukrainian German Studies at Dnipropetrovsk National University. “Khortitsa ’99” also opened an exhibit on the history of Mennonites in Ukraine and Russia at the Zaporozhye Museum of Regional Studies. These events were attended by representatives from the Deputy Premier of Ukraine, regional officials, Zaporozhye city officials, the Canadian ambassador to Ukraine (Derek Fraser), and a representative from the German embassy in Kiev. The events and the presence of the visiting dignitaries were widely covered by the local media. Suddenly Mennonites were in the news and Mennonite contributions to the development of the region were being publicly recognized. What was most remarkable was the embrace of the Mennonite story by many of these public officials, beyond the usual gestures of kindness to foreigners.

The second academic conference took place in 2004 as part of the bicentennial celebrations of the establishment of the Molochna settlement. The conference sessions were held in Zaporozhye, Melitopol and Dnipropetrovsk, three nearby regional cities and all important to the history of the Molochna Mennonites. This conference worked under the rubric of “Molochna 2004: Mennonites and their Neighbours.” Representatives from the Netherlands, Germany, Paraguay, Austria, Canada, United States, Russia and Ukraine gathered again to discuss dimensions of the Mennonite story in Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and Ukraine. This time the conference was carried by scholars from Ukraine and Russia. Thirty of thirty-nine papers in the conference program were by scholars from these two countries, nine from Westerners.

The range of topics covered by these historians was much broader than at the “Khortitsa ’99” conference. The Russian and Ukrainian scholars had accessed archival collections in national depositories in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev and in many regional archives across both countries. This new scholarship roots the Mennonite story firmly within the broader contours of Russian and Ukrainian history. Mennonite history has often been done in isolation from the larger social context and from the story of adjacent and related people groups. The prism through which these scholars look at the story is the Russian and Ukrainian context and utilizes social rather than theological categories.

The 2004 conference also included a museum exhibit. A photographic exhibit on the Molochna settlement was displayed at both the Museum of Regional Studies in Melitopol and the Museum of the University in Zaporozhye. This project had its origins in a simple question from a school principal in a Molochna village.

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2004 Academic Conference – Potemkin Palace, Dnipropetrovsk National University

2004 Academic Conference – Melitopol Pedagogical University

"Khortitsa ’99"/Academic Conference

Professor Svetlana Bobyleva

*Khortitsa ’99* Academic Conference
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“Do you have a visual history of our region? We have few pictures to show our children what this region once looked like.” The Mennonite archival network of North America collectively made a bicentennial gift of 139 photographs to the people of the Molochna region.

It is important to consider why thirty scholars in Russia and Ukraine are now investigating “It is filling in blank spots left by the historiographical constraints of the Soviet period.”

is a recognized field of scholarly investigation. In the past decade there have been more dissertations written about Mennonites in Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and Ukraine at Russian and Ukrainian universities than at universities in Canada and the United States.

Memorialization

An International Memorialization Committee for the former Soviet Union, chaired by Peter Klassen of Fresno and Harvey Dyck, Toronto, have initiated the erection of a series of Mennonite memorial markers in Ukraine, Ukraine and Russia are societies with many monuments and historical markers. Memorialization is a strong part of their cultural tradition.

The first unveilings of these monuments to memorialize the Mennonite presence in the area came at the “Khortitsa ‘99” conference. One was placed at the site where the original Mennonite church stood in Khortitsa, the second in the Nieder Khortitsa cemetery.

At the ceremony in the Nieder Khortitsa cemetery Professor Fedor Turchenko, Dean of the history faculty at Zaporozyhe State University, said: “What happened to the Mennonites was wrong. They were driven from this region after living peacefully and making many contributions to the development of our state. We will restore them to their rightful place in the history of this region.” That comment was followed by an even more powerful one by Father Vasily, Orthodox priest of the village. “I as a Ukrainian am ashamed of what happened to Mennonites in this land.

All confessions must be able to live in peace.... I wish that Mennonites would return and live here in peace.”

One of the continuing tragedies of the former Soviet Union is that there has never been a formal process by which the wrongs of the past could be addressed. There has been no “Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” as in South Africa, no Nuremberg Trials as in Germany, no means by which formal recognition and formal apologies could be rendered. These rituals do have meaning and can free a people from the burdens of the past. For those of us present in 1999 the statements of Dean Turchenko and Father Vasily will always be unforgettable and deeply symbolic moments.

In recognition of the massacres that occurred during the Civil War of 1919 two memorial monuments have been erected at the sites of mass graves. In 2001 one was unveiled at a ceremony in Novo-Petrovka (formerly Eichenfeld, Zazykovo settlement) and in 2003 at Iljanifka (formerly Ebenfeld, Boresenko settlement).

In connection with the Molochna bicentennial celebrations in 2004 monuments were unveiled in Molochansk (formerly Halbstadt), Svyetlodolinskoye (formerly Lichtenau), Bogdanovka (formerly Grundendorf) and Kirovo (formerly Ushantsee).

The Settlers monument in Molochansk, in the form of a threshing stone, is a recognition of those pioneers who in 1804 established the initial villages of the Mennonite settlement. It is placed in the central town square in front of the former Mennonite Central School building.

In front of the railway station in Svyetlodolinskoye stand two benches to commemorate the building of the railroad that linked the western part of the Molochna to major rail lines. The station has significance in many ways, perhaps most important in that it was a departure point for Mennonites who moved west toward Europe and the Americas and also for many relocated east and sent into exile.

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The Mennonite story. The desire for linkages with western scholars and institutions may account for part of the interest, but there is more. The rediscovery of the Mennonite story is also a discovery of the Russian and Ukrainian story. It is filling in blank spots left by the historiographical constraints of the Soviet period. Ethno-cultural studies were not fashionable in Soviet times. By now the study of Mennonites as a sub-field in the history of national minorities is a recognized field of scholarly investigation. In the past decade, there have been more dissertations written about Mennonites in Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and Ukraine at Russian and Ukrainian universities than at universities in Canada and the United States.

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Johann Cornies, who died in 1848
In Bogdanovka a marker was placed in the old cemetery.
All of the monument dedicatory ceremonies, stylized by Ukrainian protocol, include speeches by local and regional officials. In 2004 the Mennonite story was better known to these officials then it was in 1999, and its invocation was frequent. What was interesting in 2004 was the degree to which the Mennonite past was seen as a potential guide to the future.
At the unveiling of a memorial marker in Bogdanovka (formerly Gnadenfeld) the village mayor said it most directly: “We want to carry into the future the values that you taught us, the legacy that you left to us. That legacy was lost for a time. We thank you for helping us to recover it. With your help we want it to shape our future.”
Conversation with the village mayor, following his remarks, suggest that he may not have fully understood what that legacy was.

But he surely knew that it was different from what currently exists in Gnadenfeld.
The crowds of locals that have gathered at each of the monument unveilings—in the Khorititsa, Yazykovo, Borosenko and Molochanka settlements—surely do so partly out of curiosity, out of the fact that the dedicatory moments bring busesloads of foreigners to these remote hamlets. But their presence suggests more—a hunger for knowing more of the history of their own communities, a recognition that this past was not something to be dismissed, not to be set aside as only the exploitation of the kulaks and the false consciousness of the religious. Rather it might contain something that could rebuild and revitalize their villages and their region. Might the material culture that remains visible and the new monuments with their story point to a tradition that holds promise for the future?
My father, who was born in the Molochanka settlement, would have taken delight in the mayor’s comments. Borrowing and altering the lines of another he often said, “From the altar of the Russian Mennonite past we take the fire, not the ash.” It seemed to me during recent encounters that some Ukrainians are recovering the fire.

Dr. Abraham Friesen will conduct a lecture/discussion series every Sunday evening beginning January 6 through February 10, 2008. This series will focus on his book, In Defense of Privilege: Russian Mennonites and the State Before and During World War I (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 2006.) Dr. Friesen, a native of Winnipeg, Canada, is Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus of the University of California at Santa Barbara where he taught for thirty-seven years.
All interested persons are invited to attend.
Copies of Dr. Friesen’s book will be available for purchase.
Sponsored by California Mennonite Historical Society and College Community Mennonite Brethren Church Adult Education Commission.