



Recapturing the Russian Mennonite Story

by Paul Toews and Walter Unger
photos by Johannes Dyck

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To celebrate the bicentennial of the founding of Molochna, the largest Mennonite settlement in Tsarist and Soviet Russia, a major academic conference, “Molochna and Its Neighbors” was held in several southern Ukrainian centers, notably Zaporozhye and Melitopol, in June 2004.

Mennonites are a confessional group that migrated from sixteenth-century Holland to Poland to Russia/Ukraine, and then disbursed to many countries. There are over half a million Russian Mennonite descendants in North America. For the past decade, these descendants have been returning to Ukraine in considerable numbers as scholars and tourists. A renovated historic-girls’ school now serves as a Mennonite regional relief center, specializing in medical and educational projects. The Mennonite Central Committee and other Mennonite agencies also are active in Ukraine.

Researchers from seven countries presented thirty-seven papers at the June conference. Ceremonial events were held at three Molochna village sites, as well as in the city of Dnepropetrovsk. The major event was the unveiling of the Settler’s Monument in Halbstadt/Molochansk, with Canadian Ambassador Andrew Robinson participating. Canadian novelist, Rudy Wiebe, addressed Ukrainian university students at the historic Potemkin Palace in Dnepropetrovsk.

Conference organizer, University of Toronto historian Harvey Dyck, was unable to attend due to illness. His colleagues and friends rallied to mount the conference and its events. Co-chairs were Canadian historian, John Staples, and Ukrainian geographer, Nikolai Krylov.

Included in the Bicentennial activities was the unveiling of several monuments. The

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Mennonite International Memorialization Committee for the Former Soviet Union supervised the placement of a Settlers' Monument in Molochansk (formerly Halbstadt). Two benches at the railway station of Svetlodolinskoe (formerly Lichtenau) recall the voluntary migration of Mennonites to freedom in the West and involuntary deportation to the eastern Gulag. The station is on the railway line built by the Wall brothers and other investors. Two plaques placed in Vladovka (formerly Waldheim) recognize the role played by Agnes and Cornelius Warkentin in the establishment of a still-existing hospital. The second plaque is placed at the local school that occupies the site of the former Isaac Neufeld factory. In Bogdanovka (formerly Gnadenfeld) a monument was placed at the site of a former Mennonite cemetery.

An historic Sunday worship service was conducted in the famous former Zentralschule (regional High School) in Halbstadt, the first such service since 1943. For the opening hymn, the congregation sang "Great is Thy Faithfulness" in Russian and English. Pastor Jakob Tiessen of the nearby Kutuzovka Church conducted the service. Johannes Dyck, formerly of Kazakhstan, currently living in Germany, presented the sermon in which he celebrated the "love and hope of our Christian faith." Members of the Zaporozhye and Kutuzovka

Mennonite congregations attended this service, along with representatives of the diaspora communities in Paraguay, Germany, Canada and the United States. Most of the audience, however, consisted of local, non-Mennonite Ukrainians.

Local and regional officials and many villagers attending each event expressed appreciation for the multiple contributions that Mennonites made to the history of the region. One local pastor stated, "We wish to build on the past which you so richly gave us."

Ukrainians spoke of this spring as having been unusually beautiful. Spring rains watered the steppe, the wildflowers were brilliant, the landscape was green. After the winter, the renewal of spring was a metaphor for what has been happening to Mennonite-Ukrainian relationships. The Mennonite story, long suppressed, is being rediscovered as a vital part of the history of south Ukraine. Ukrainian society is embracing the values that shaped this story, and sees it as necessary for its own renewal. The admiration of Mennonites as a people of memory, for having a sense of



Descendents of the Wall brothers (top) attended the unveiling of a monument to Mennonite migration in the Lichtenau train station. The lush Ukrainian countryside (bottom) after revival of the spring rains.

tradition that anchors them in changing times, was repeatedly invoked. The historic celebration rekindled relationships and touched the hearts of its participants.

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