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Mennonites and Politics In Paraguay

by Victor Wall

When the Anabaptist movement arose during the Reformation, church-state relations was a prominent issue. Religious and political leaders were alarmed by the movement, denouncing it as heretical and persecuting those who followed this new way. In that context, Anabaptists came to view the state with further apprehension and continued to maintain a distance from any participation. With the later growth of democratic political structures in Europe, Mennonites began to modify their objections to participation in government, at times even contending that responsible citizenship required it. Similarly, North American Mennonites made a move toward greater participation, albeit a little later than their European counterparts. In the twentieth century, as Mennonites migrated to South America, the question of believers' responsibility to and relationship with government also arose. To understand this situation, it is necessary to examine the distinctively Latin American and Mennonite context in which this matter became important.



Mennonite immigrants to the Paraguayan Chaco found life difficult and labor-intensive. Here a family makes bricks for their farm buildings. (Photo courtesy of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, from the C.N. and Helen Hiebert collection. ca 1947-48)

Mennonite Immigration Into Paraguay

Canadian Immigrants

In 1870, Paraguay's war with Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay ended. This struggle reduced Paraguay to a small, poor country that had seven times as many women as men. That same year, Paraguay adopted a new constitution that was open

and friendly to immigrants, a distinctive that has been evident in all subsequent Paraguayan legislation.

In this context, the legislation that created the conditions for Mennonite immigration is not an exception, but rather, a logical consequence of Paraguay's attitude toward immigrants. The only exceptional factor in Mennonite settlement was the fact that a religious group settled in the hostile Chaco. Paraguay issued

the immigration law permitting Mennonites to settle on July 26, 1921, but the actual immigration occurred in 1926 and 1927.

An unusual development preceded Mennonite settlement in Paraguay. A former millionaire from Norway, Fred Engen, dreamed of establishing an ideal community. Having lost most of his money, he worked as a real estate agent for McRoberts, a New York lawyer. There he learned of some Canadian Mennonites who



Notation on the back of this photo reads: "Father gone. Mother sick. The two daughters are sawing logs for building a home. One log for a table, smaller logs for chairs." In the Chaco, women vastly outnumbered men, leaving women to carry out all tasks involved in creating a new life in the wilderness. (Photo courtesy of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, from the C.N. and Helen Hiebert collection. ca. 1947-48)

"[In 1870] Paraguay adopted a new constitution that was open and friendly to immigrants."

were looking for a new country. This fit his dream perfectly: a state of nonviolent people.

Already in 1919, Engen had gone on a dangerous expedition into the Paraguayan Chaco. When he returned to Asunción, he cabled McRoberts immediately. "I found the promised land!" Engen wrote.

The Canadian Mennonites in question had migrated to Canada from Russia in 1874. By

1919, they had another conflict with government, this time over education. While the government had allowed them initially to maintain their own schools with instruction in German, it now insisted on the use of English. The Mennonites were afraid that they would lose control of their schools.

Several expeditions into Latin America followed. In 1919, three men went independently to Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. The same year, another group went to the same countries with the intention of getting a special arrangement with the government on the issues of military service and schools in the own language. In October 1920, a third expedition went to Paraguay, but advised their communities not to go there. They also considered Mexico, but that also raised doubts.

In the meantime, McRoberts, who had a personal relationship with the President of Paraguay,

became more interested in a Mennonite settlement there. When he visited, he found Paraguay to be receptive to Mennonite settlements in the Chaco.

On February 11, 1921, another delegation went to the Paraguayan Chaco. There, it found that land was available and legislative conditions were favorable to emigration. Near present-day Filadelfia, it hung a cross on a tree with the initials M. E. (Mennonite Expedition). With the delegation's recommendation, the community made the decision to migrate to Paraguay.

This migration gained the attention of the international press, which exaggerated both the negative and positive aspects of the issue. Papers carrying reports included the *New York Sun*; the *New York Evening Post*; the *New York Herald Tribune*; the *Christian Science Monitor*; the *Chicago Daily News*; the *Winnipeg Free Press*; and the *Daily Province* (Vancouver).

The *Daily Province* (December 1926) noted: "The Indians are a danger for the pilgrims in

“The reasons for emigration are two: their conscience and the Sermon on the Mount.”

the South American Paradise. Through the military the Paraguayan government tries to protect these people in the wilderness against the attacks of the Indians.” When this report appeared, Mennonites had not yet arrived in Paraguay.

The *Christian Exponent* (April 24, 1928) wrote, “The reasons for the emigration are two: their conscience and the Sermon on the Mount, as these relate to war and to the Christian Education of their children.” The article criticized Canadian society for not taking Mennonites seriously. The emigration was seen as a tragedy for Canada.

In the meantime, a contingent of Canadian Mennonites moved to the Paraguayan Chaco and founded Menno Colony.

Due to the sensational reporting, the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities sent missionaries from Argentina to visit the new Mennonite settlement in February 1929. A month earlier, the United States government had sent the consul from Asuncion to visit the new settlement. Both had positive reports. As a consequence, in 1929, a decision was made to send Russian Mennonite refugees to Paraguay.

Russian Mennonites

On November 25, 1929, Moscow permitted 5,671 Mennonites to leave Russia. Unfortunately, this

permission came too late for many of the 10,000 Mennonites who had waited in Moscow, hoping to emigrate. Many were denied and then shipped in cargo trains to Siberia and other unknown destinations.

Those who obtained permission to emigrate went to Germany. There they found it difficult to find countries that would accept them. Canadian health regulations prohibited many Mennonites refugees from settling there. Brazil and Paraguay were two available alternatives.

Two central figures emerged to lead this relocation project, Benjamin H. Unruh from Karlsruhe, Germany, himself Russian Mennonite, and Harold S. Bender, the emissary of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). The recommendation of MCC, according to a cable from H. S. Bender, was: “. . . send Lutherans to Brazil, but not Mennonites. . . .” He made this distinction because Paraguay allowed exemption from military service.

After further negotiations, about 1,000 refugees were allowed to go to Canada, 1,233 to Brazil, and 1,572 to Paraguay. In 1930, they founded the Fernheim colony, a neighbor to the Menno colony. In 1932, during the Chaco war between Paraguay and Bolivia, an additional group settled in Fernheim. These were Russian Mennonites who fled Russia via Harbin, China.

There were many physical difficulties and emergency situations in the colony Fernheim. In 1937, just seven years after it’s founding, one third of the Fernheim colony left the Chaco and founded the Friesland colony in eastern Paraguay.

A Third Wave of Immigrants

Following World War II, a third wave of immigrants came to Paraguay from Europe. In 1947-48, they founded the colony Neuland in the Chaco and the colony Volendam in Eastern Paraguay, not far from the colony Friesland.

“There were many physical difficulties and emergency situations in the colony Fernheim.”

Peter and Elfrieda Dyck led this immigration project.

In 1948, another group of Canadian Mennonites founded the colonies Sommerfeld and Bergtal, both in Eastern Paraguay.

During this time, Mennonites who were dissatisfied with their particular colonies, established the Tres Palmas colony where they hoped to find greater freedom.

Recent Mennonite Settlements in Paraguay

Since 1969, various groups migrated from Mexico to Paraguay. They founded colonies in Eastern Paraguay, including Rio Verde, Manitoba, Santa Clara, Nueva Durango, and Campo Alto.

In 1968, several Amish families

“The choice of Paraguay as the destination was due to the availability of land and to Paraguay’s favorable political climate.”

moved from the United States to Fernheim, hoping to maintain their traditions while living in this colony. Surprisingly, the colony Fernheim proved to be more dangerous for their youth than North American society and culture. After a decade, they moved back to the United States.

A different approach led the Beachy Amish to found the colony Luz y Esperanza in 1967. Believing that their home church over-emphasized tradition, these people wanted to maintain tradition while becoming more missionary-minded. A number of people moved there and invited Paraguayans to join them in their faith and lifestyle.

Also in 1967, some Old Mennonites who felt that their home church in the United States

had become too secularized, founded the colonies Agua Azul and Rio Corrientes. They too are very missionary minded.

The Mennonite Community in Asunción

The Asunción Mennonite community developed slowly at first, but by 2004 at least 1,500 German-speaking Mennonites were living there. Today, there are two churches, each with about 300 members. In addition, there are the Mennonites who do not belong to a church, although they maintain an ethnic identify as Mennonites.

The total number of immigrant Mennonites in Paraguay is approximately 30,000. About half of this number reside in the three colonies in the Chaco.

Motivations for Immigration

The question about the motivation for Mennonite migration to Paraguay is an interesting one. There have been two main reasons why Mennonites left their homes to go to Paraguay, neither involving mission concerns. First, they went to find land, to find locations where they could be separate from society, maintain their own schools, speak German, and live in closed communities. Second, there was need for a country for Russian refugees. Whatever the motive, the presence of Mennonites has changed Paraguay.

The choice of Paraguay as the destination was due to

the availability of land and to Paraguay’s favorable political climate. It is interesting to take a closer look at the content of Law 514, the famous “charter of privileges” of the Mennonites, much like concessions granted earlier in Russia. Law 514/21 is based on the petition of the Mennonite immigrants, and offers conditions designed to attract as many Mennonites as possible.

The conditions included (but were not limited to): 1) exemption from military service in times of peace and war; 2) exemption from swearing of oaths; and 3) the right to educate their own children and provide instruction in the German language.

These rights were not established by a decree of the president but by a law of Congress ratified in July 1921. After a long, tough debate in the Paraguayan Congress, thirteen senators voted in favor, with five opposed to this law. No subsequent Paraguayan government has questioned this legislation. Historian Gerhard Ratzlaff has written:

“Without the guaranteed privileges of Bill 514 the Mennonites would not have come to the Chaco, and Bill 514 would not have passed if the Mennonites would not have asked to settle in the Paraguayan Chaco.”

Mennonite migration forced governments in Latin America to debate the issue of conscientious objection to participation in war, something they had not done before. Paraguay and Mexico made provision for such exemption; Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Bolivia did not. When Paraguay adopted a new constitution in 1992, it upheld the principle of conscientious objection.

The Paraguayan government welcomed Mennonite refugees to settle in the Chaco, an area that both Bolivia and Paraguay desired. They carved routes into the region but travel was difficult and roads were often impassable. (Photo courtesy of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, from the C.N. and Helen Hiebert collection. ca. 1947-48)



“Mennonite migration forced governments in Latin American to debate... conscientious objection...”

Land Conflicts and Mennonite Settlements

The land that Mennonites bought in the Chaco was situated in an inhospitable region. Disputes over this area precipitated the war between Bolivia and Paraguay in 1932-1935. A leitmotiv of the liberal government that made it possible for Mennonites to settle in Paraguay was: “Gobernar es poblar”; meaning “to govern is to populate.” From the government’s standpoint, the Chaco needed

to be populated. Again, to quote Gerhard Ratzlaff,

“In the discussion regarding the privileges asked for by the Mennonites there were two main issues that spoke in favor of the privileges being granted: the Chaco was an undeveloped area and the boundary with Bolivia was not yet established.”

If the region to be settled had been any other than the ill-reputed Chaco, it is questionable whether Paraguay would have extended special privileges to the Mennonite immigrants. The determining factor in favor of Mennonite settlements surely was the argument that the presence of Mennonites in the Chaco would secure the country

against Bolivia’s claim. A further compelling argument was that, in the long run, the closed settlement would promote economic integration of the Chaco.

The first decades of Mennonite settlement in the Chaco were extremely difficult. The struggle for survival was such that it defies description and understanding by anyone who was not present. Without the aid of MCC, North American and European churches, and other organizations, it is unlikely that the immigrants to the Chaco could have survived.

Between Government and Mennonite Civil Organizations

It has been a policy of the Mennonite communities in Paraguay to cultivate a healthy relationship with the government, regardless of what party or through what *coup d'état* the new government originated. This was not done, however, at the expense of Mennonite values and principles.

The Paraguayan Mennonite relationship with the government was cultivated and maintained on an institutional level, usually developed by representatives of the colonies rather than directly with the churches. This gave Paraguayan society the perception that Mennonites, although a religious group, were an ethnic and economic community that made a distinct contribution to society and to the country.

To this day, Paraguayan government and society consider Mennonites of immigrant background to be an ethnic group not quite like other evangelical groups. On one hand, Mennonites

are not automatically viewed as part of any evangelical movement; on the other, Paraguayan converts sometimes find it difficult to establish a religious identity. Even so, Mennonite community life has had an impact in Paraguay that, on the whole, has strengthened the evangelistic efforts as well.

Mennonite Life in the Context of Community or Colony

The Mennonite colonies, especially the “progressive” ones, quickly gained the admiration of the government, of Paraguayan society, and of the indigenous groups around them. This was particularly true in the Chaco, given the harsh nature of the geography and climate.

Mennonites in the colonies usually are not identified as churches, although everyone understands the centrality of the Christian faith. Rather they are called communities, colonies, colonists, immigrants, “mennos”, or simply an ethnic minority. This sometimes raises the question of what makes the designation

“Mennonite” attractive and distinctive, both within the communities and to the society around them.

The following illustrations show how the Paraguayan Mennonites portray and understand themselves. A monument stands in Filadelfia with columns that represent faith, unity and labor (work). A well-known slogan is “*Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz*” or “Common Interest before Personal Interest.” These characteristics have been guiding principles in the communities and in Paraguayan Mennonite life.

This does not mean that there has been an absence of conflicts, but rather that members of the community have maintained a basic predisposition to consider these perspectives in all situations. The only major conflict so far, one that caused major damage and could not be resolved internally, related to support of the German government during WW II. In this instance, it must be noted that there were strong influences coming from outside, both from Germany and North America. In addition, the German government had provided assistance to destitute Mennonite refugees when they left the Soviet Union prior to finding a home in Paraguay.

About the Author

Author Victor Wall (Asunción, Paraguay) is a graduate of Fresno Pacific University and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. He was the founding pastor of Raices MB Church (Spanish) in Asunción and is currently a member of its pastoral team. He is chair of the MB Vereinigung (German-speaking Conference), Chair of the Board of the Evangelical University of Paraguay, Dean of the Faculty of Education, Chair of the Board of the Alberto Schweitzer and Johannes Gutenberg schools, and member of the National Council of Education and Culture. Victor and his wife, Margita (also an FPU graduate) have three children: Sebastian, Marcelo, and Debora.

—This two-part article was adapted from Victor Wall's speech to the California Mennonite Historical Society's annual meeting (May 2004). Part one, in this issue, tells the story of Mennonite migration into Paraguay. Part two (coming Spring 2005) will describe the current relationship of Paraguayan Mennonites with the Paraguayan government. Special thanks to Victor for sharing this Paraguayan Mennonite story with CMHS and for allowing The Bulletin to adapt his speech to print.