



Genealogy

World War II and Mennonite Genealogy

by Alan Peters

War has horrifying consequences for those it touches and World War II was no exception. Millions of innocent people, including Mennonites, suffered unspeakably because of the war. Despite its horror and destruction the war also presented an opportunity for relocation. The records of the relocation of war victims have provided valuable information pertaining to Mennonite families escaping oppression and war.

For fifty years, Mennonites and other Russian-German groups have benefited from the genealogical work conducted in wartime Russia by Benjamin H. Unruh and Karl Stumpp. The occupying German army gave these men the assignment to conduct family research among German-speaking peoples of Russia. With their assignment, Unruh and Stumpp were

participants, to some degree, in the programs and policies of Nazi Germany, a fact that we sometimes ignore. Their research, however, is invaluable in revealing genealogical resources in the former Soviet Union that many feared lost or destroyed.

Unruh's work, *Die niederlaendisch-niederdeutschen Hintergruende der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, and Stumpp's similar book, *The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the Years 1763 to 1862*, have long been the primary reference works regarding Mennonite and other Russian-German family histories. Both of these important texts are available at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies at Fresno Pacific University.

More recently, historians have located another wartime resource that they are now preparing for

research and review. This is a collection of documents known as the "Einwandererzentralstelle" (EWZ) files of the German government. These immigration records provide information regarding the nearly three million ethnic Germans who applied for immigration and naturalization in Germany between 1939 and 1945. Scattered throughout these applications are documents filed by Mennonite families seeking sanctuary in Germany as they escaped with the retreating German army in 1943.

These records provide us with previously unavailable information on Mennonites from various parts of the Soviet Union. It includes data in a number of formats with names, birth dates and references to other files containing ancestral charts and more extensive family information.

Historians are undertaking a massive research effort to extract family information from these files. So far, nearly 9,000 Mennonites have been identified with, undoubtedly, many more to be found in the 3,724 microfilm rolls of records. To review the first available Mennonite index see the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society web site at <http://www.mmhs.org/russia/ewz/ewz.htm>. For a full description of the records, see Tim Janzen's article in the March 2000 issue of the *Mennonite Historian* also on the web at <http://old.mbconf.ca/old/historian/00-03/feature-3.html>.

The old proverb says, "Every cloud has a silver lining." Even the despicable events of WWII have now brought to light important information regarding our Mennonite relatives, about whom we had so little information.