

church buildings is one that stays with many tourists. It is moving to think of the worship that once rang out and the eerie silence that now haunts these decrepit structures. They are visual reminders of both the glory and tragedy of the Russian Mennonite story. They are among the finest architec-



*The Schönsee (Molotschna) Mennonite Church*

*Photo: Paul Toews*

tural achievements of the Mennonite commonwealth. As such they point us toward the educational, cultural and economic grandeur of the Mennonite story that unfolded in these Ukrainian lands. Yet they also stand as the most stunning monuments to a people that are now largely gone. Their current silence harbors the pain and trauma of what transpired to their former parishioners during the past seventy years.

While most Mennonites have left Ukraine, the Mennonite presence remains. Descendants of the Mennonite settlements in these regions have carried parts of Ukraine with them and in turn parts of the Mennonite story live on in Ukraine. In many of the villages formerly populated by Mennonites there are elderly people who lived there before the Mennonite exodus. In conversation with them I have frequently been asked if the Mennonite will ever return. In a 1993 visit to Pordenau (Molotschna) an elderly women reflected on how she missed Mennonite singing. In schools that were built by Mennonites and that continue to be utilized for educational purposes, the current school officials invariably offer thanks for the fine facilities that were left for them. And in recent conversations with Zaporozhye city officials, they asked when the Mennonites were going to return. The question was followed by the comment that we need "your kind of people to rebuild the moral fabric of our communities."

Drifting down the Dnieper is a wonderful way to visit these historic sites. I have also traveled this way by air and land. The river cruise permits one to escape many of the frustrations that have been part of the land and air routes utilized by Mennonites visiting these places for the past twenty years. But it offers more. Walter and Marina Unger,

the Toronto organizers of these Mennonite Heritage cruises, have caught something of the adventure and meaning of these trips down the Dnieper. In a program booklet they prepared for the 1995 cruise passengers, they wrote:

There is something elemental about a river voyage, especially a boat trip to the sea. This is the way people have travelled for thousands of years. Ours is also a trip back in time. It will start with the rich history of Kiev, move to the emotionally-charged Russian Mennonite time and end in Odessa, with its own complex ambiguities in time on the ancient shores of the Black Sea. Such a trip is mythic. It is an adventure with echoes of Odysseus on his wine-dark sea or Huckleberry Finn, whose entertaining trip down the Mississippi gave him important clues about humanity and himself. This communal trip down the Dnieper [is] psychologically and spiritually enriching for us. It [puts] us in touch with our past, with each other, and with ourselves, in ways we will likely find both surprising and satisfying.

And so it was for me and 160 others on this inaugural Mennonite Heritage Cruise.

## Financial Support Needed for Russian Archival Acquisition Program

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States has had many far-ranging consequences. One of the pleasant changes has been the growing accessibility of Russian and Ukrainian state archival institutions to western archivists, historians and genealogists.

Visits by various Mennonite historians and archivists to Russian and Ukrainian archival centers during the past several years have revealed treasures for understanding the story of Mennonites in Russia and the Soviet Union that were previously hardly imaginable. The reigning assumption had been that many of the records about the Mennonite colonies in European Russia or Ukraine were destroyed during World War II.

The discovery in 1991 of the official Molotschna Colony Archives in Odessa (since named the Peter J. Braun Archives) was the first indication that many of these records had indeed survived. Subsequent discoveries in Zaporozhye, Dnepropetrovsk, Simferopol and St. Petersburg suggest riches far beyond the Braun Archives. In St. Petersburg, the capital of Tsarist Russia during the Mennonite period of 1789-1917, we are discovering materials that range far beyond the settlements of Ukraine.

These archival institutions hold materials of many different kinds: official reports filed by colony representatives regard-

ing schools, church membership, agricultural and industrial production; observations and records collected by Russian and Soviet government officials; census records for both villages and colonies; vital statistics (birth, marriage and death records); emigration records, and yes, even some church records.

The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno is currently entering into agreements with the archives in St. Petersburg, Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhye. In St. Petersburg and Zaporozhye the agreements will be in collaboration with other North American Mennonite archival institutions. Currently we are the only Mennonite organization negotiating with Dnepropetrovsk.

We recently forwarded \$2500 to St. Petersburg and nearly \$1000 to Dnepropetrovsk for the purpose of microfilming their Mennonite records. In order to complete the negotiations in Zaporozhye, we will need to commit ourselves to \$4500 per year for three years. In exchange we will receive 150,000 pages of documents from the Zaporozhye archives.

We are looking for friends and supporters who will help us underwrite this project on a three-year basis. Please carefully consider whether you might be able to assist us in procuring these important historical records.

## Genealogy Committee moving ahead on CD-ROM project; other activities

The January 1996 issue of *The Mennonite Genealogist* reports on several items of interest from the Genealogy Project Committee (GPC) of the California Mennonite Historical Society. Perhaps most important is the committee's progress toward releasing the GRANDMA database in CD-ROM format. The CD-ROM, which the committee hopes to release by summer 1996, will tentatively contain the latest version of GRANDMA, a database of ship passenger list information, the Brother's Keeper genealogy program, and digitized copies of the Rosenort (Prussia) Church family records and the earliest North and South Enid (Oklahoma) Mennonite Brethren Church family records. Subsequent CD-ROM releases will include at least one new set of pre-immigration and post-immigration church family records along with the most recent version of GRANDMA.

After two successful mergers of data, the GRANDMA database now contains over 134,000 names. The merging process has been greatly facilitated by the development of GEDTOOL, a program that recognizes and identifies possible duplicate entries when merging multiple databases.

The GRANDMA project has caught the attention of other Mennonite genealogical groups. One of these, called the "OMII Genealogical Project," has taken steps to coordinate its efforts with our committee. The OMII project, which is compiling information on Swiss/South German Mennonites,

currently has identified several such databases containing about 200,000 names. What is important and encouraging about the two projects, apart from the fact that both are working at parallel endeavors, is that they have standardized software and name-coding systems. A joint effort by the OMII Genealogical Project and the CMHS Genealogy Project Committee has resulted in a Swiss/South German Mennonite name code system similar to the GPC's Low German name code system. This will make it possible to more easily merge these databases if that should ever seem advisable. There are no current plans to do so.

During 1995 the GPC released its *Handbook for the Low German Genealogist Using Brother's Keeper 5.2*, which contains guidelines for entering data for the GRANDMA project. The GPC encourages all persons who are actively entering genealogical data into computer formats to obtain a copy of the handbook and familiarize themselves with the standards that have been developed for the GRANDMA project. Copies are available for \$5.00 plus \$1.00 shipping from the California Mennonite Historical Society at 4824 E. Butler, Fresno CA 93727.

Persons interested in receiving future issues of *The Mennonite Genealogist* or wanting more information about the Genealogy Project Committee's work should contact Jeff Wall at 563 E. Salem Ave., Fresno CA 93720 or via e-mail at [zzjlw@valleynet.com](mailto:zzjlw@valleynet.com).

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