

2. The Mennonite Anna Penner in the colony Gnadenfeld has joined the new sect with a son and daughter but without her husband.
3. The Mennonites in the following colonies have joined the new sect without their families: Grossweide, Gerhard Wall; Rudnerweide, Isaak Mathies; Sparau, Johann Neufeld.
4. The Mennonite in the colony Waldheim, Jacob Bekker is a widower and has no children.

Drifting Down the Dnieper: Reflections on the 1995 Mennonite Heritage Cruise

by Paul Toews

On Easter Sunday, 1788, fifty persons with wagons and possessions departed from the village of Bohnsack (near Danzig) in what is now northern Poland. They were the vanguard of the Mennonite migration to New Russia. After five weeks of trudging along muddy roads they reached Riga. From Riga they followed the Duna River to Dubrovna where they wintered. Others soon followed, and by the spring of 1789 there were 220 families ready to follow the Dnieper River southward to their new homeland in what today is the country of Ukraine.

In late 1995 I and 160 other Mennonites retraced part of that trek. This time most of us were from North America. We flew into Kiev to participate in the inaugural Mennonite Heritage Cruise down the same river. While the route was the same as in 1788, the circumstances were very different. The trip for those initial immigrants was hardly pleasant. Among other problems, when they reached their destination, they discovered that as they trudged along the river their baggage, traveling by barges, had been broken into and most of the valuables were missing. For the cruise passengers the trip on the MS *Viktor Glushkov* was secure, comfortable and

pleasant in every way.

The 1788-1789 immigrants were hoping to settle in the Berislav region, down toward the Dnieper delta. That land would have been akin to the rich river bottom land they had left in the Vistula Delta. But they were not able to proceed that far south. Instead of the site that had been promised to Jacob Hoeppner and Johann Bartsch, the scouts sent by Mennonites in Poland to find new homelands, they were forced to stop where the small Chortitza stream joins the Dnieper River. Here the soil was sandy and not as rich as in the vicinity of Berislav and the land much more undulating than the flat land of the Vistula. Our 1995 cruise, by contrast, had no difficulty getting past Chortitza and down to Berislav. In fact we traveled with ease from Kiev, our point of departure, to Odessa, the final destination of the cruise.

The trip down the Dnieper takes one to the heart of the Russian Mennonite story. The Chortitza colony, the original Mennonite colony, lies immediately to the west of the river. The village of Chortitza, the administrative center for the colony, is situated on the banks of the Dnieper. The Molotschna, the second colony established, is east but within easy driving distance of Zaporozhye, the industrial city on the Dnieper that now encompasses several villages of old Chortitza. Several daughter colonies are also within driving distance of Zaporozhye and the Dnieper.

The Dnieper River, now as in the late eighteenth century, is one of the major waterways of Russia and Ukraine. From its headwaters near Smolensk in central European Russia it flows southward for 1,420 miles to empty into the Black Sea. Long an important trade route, it is now also becoming popular for river cruises.

There are few Mennonites living today along the Dnieper. The forced relocations of Germanic peoples during World War II displaced many Mennonites to Soviet territories east of the Ural mountains. Others fled west with the retreating German armies. It has been axiomatic that, with the exception of a few Mennonite women who had married Ukrainians or Russians, all the rest were gone. One of the interesting discoveries of this trip was that there seemingly are more



The MS *Viktor Glushkov*

Photo: Paul Toews

Mennonites than anyone previously had imagined who either stayed or returned after the 1957 amnesty granted to political prisoners of World War II. It is now clear that some people of Mennonite background have been drifting back to their former villages in the Dnieper region. A new Mennonite congregation is now emerging in the city of Zaporozhye. This congregation is discovering some of these former Mennonites. Several events of the recent past have made it more realistic for these people to reclaim their former identities. With the passing of Communist control, the last restrictions on religious freedom are also gone. There is no longer a political price to be paid for being Christian. In fact, among many citizens of both Russia and Ukraine there is a new interest in Christian faith. Important public officials in both countries readily admit that a rebirth of Christianity is needed to rebuild the moral fabric of their societies.

Another factor that seemingly encourages greater willingness to be identified as Mennonite is a lessening of hostility towards Germanic peoples. The memory of World War II still hangs heavily on the western republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States. City tours still include a stop at the World War II memorial, which virtually every town has. The strong anti-fascist commentary of the past, however, is now gone. Germany is no longer an ideological enemy as it was during the Communist era. Furthermore, Germany is the largest foreign investor in the rebuilding of the Ukrainian economy. Being linked to a Germanic past no longer carries the weight that it once did for citizens of Russia and Ukraine.

During the stopover in Zaporozhye our group had several moving encounters with Mennonites of the region. About 30 percent of the 160 tour members were born in Ukraine. Many also spoke Low German. One group was visiting the historic oak tree in Chortitzia, which has legendary significance both for Cossack and Mennonite history. An elderly woman from the locale, hearing some Low German being spoken, began singing "Gott ist die Liebe." The North Americans gathered around and joined in. She was a Mrs. Reimer, who had lived her entire life in the shadow of the oak tree. She came to the tree frequently to sell a few fruits and vegetables from her garden to the tourists coming to see the oak. It was a poignant encounter.

Even more stunning was the experience of Frank Wall of Leamington, Ontario. While we were leaving the ship one morning, an elderly Ukrainian man stood on the dock with a handful of photographs he was showing to those of us passing by. Wall stopped to look at them, only to discover that the man was holding a photograph of Wall's—and the Ukrainian's—grandfather. The two men on the deck were first cousins, members of a family that had lost all contact with each other since 1938.

But even with the discovery of more former Mennonites in the Dnieper River region, most Mennonites will not travel there to find relatives. Most of those Mennonite relatives are now in Germany. Those still in the Commonwealth of Independent States are more likely to be found thousands of miles east of the Dnieper. One travels the Dnieper to see the

physical remnants of the 150-year stay of Mennonites in the region.

In some ways very little in this region has changed. In



The Main Street of Alexanderkrone, Molotschna

Photo: Paul Toews

other ways the changes are immense. The geographical layout of many villages remains as they were created by the Mennonites—a single street with twenty to forty residences. Some village homes remain, but many were dismantled during the Soviet agricultural collectivization of the 1930s. The spacious homes built by Mennonites were too "bourgeois" for the proletarian Communist movement.

Driving through the villages gives one the sense of stepping back in time. At dusk the cattle, sheep, ducks and geese are herded down the middle of the street, back to their respective homes. Standing in the village street one can witness hay being transported in multiple ways: in baskets on people's backs, by bicycle, by horse-drawn wagon, by tractor-drawn wagon and by truck. Some of the front yards look exactly as they did when Mennonites lived there: fruit trees, flowers and vegetable gardens. Those physical remnants tell their own story. With each passing year the material legacy of the Mennonites grows fainter. Even so, the outlines of the economic wealth and cultural sophistication of the Russian Mennonites in what is often referred to as the "golden age"—the decades before World War I—is still visible.

Both the Chortitzia and Molotschna colonies initially were populated by people who brought skills as farmers or as tradesmen. After difficult beginnings, particularly in the early years of Chortitzia, they built thriving economies. Land holdings increased and prosperous Mennonite farmers acquired additional land beyond the boundaries of the original settlements. By the late nineteenth century there were numerous estate owners whose holdings exceeded 100,000 acres. The development of an industrial base during the latter half of the nineteenth century paralleled this agricultural expansion. Milling and the manufacture of agricultural implements became two very substantial

Mennonite industries. Mennonites became increasingly important players in the economy of New Russia. With the increasing wealth that accompanied this economic development came fine and imposing buildings: homes, factories, schools and churches. Many of these larger buildings remain. Unlike the village homes, which were too large for private residences in the new communist order, these larger facilities were utilized either for their original purposes or for other public needs.

Some of the factories and mills are still being used for their original purposes. Others, like the D. B. Schulz factory in Neu-Osterwick (Chortitzia colony) and the Dyck Mill in Halbstadt (Molotschna colony) have been converted to other kinds of agricultural or commercial usages. Some, like the Bernhard W. Rempel factory, also in Neu-Osterwick, have been converted into cultural centers.

A good number of the schools still stand. The Girls School and Teacher Training School in Chortitzia, the *Zentralschule* in Nikolaifeld (Yazykovo colony), the Neu-Osterwick *Zentralschule*, the village school in Burwalde (Chortitzia colony) and other Mennonite school buildings are still being utilized for educational purposes. Other schools have been turned into orphanages, resettlement houses for new immigrants, community club houses, headquarters for collective farms or communities and residences. The architectural styles of these structures are varied. The Halbstadt *Zentral-*



The Heinrich Willms Estate in Halbstadt

Photo: Paul Toews



The Chortitzia Girls School

Photo: Paul Toews

schule is designed in the Neoclassical Style. The *Zentralschule* in Nikolaifeld has Gothic features, while the Girls School in Chortitzia has touches of *Jugendstil* (a turn of the century German architectural style) and Renaissance architecture.

Some magnificent houses still stand. In Chortitzia the residence of the Wallman family (known as "Die Burg") is a castle-like structure that was begun before World War I by Mrs. Wallman, the widow of the factory owner. It is a large, three-story building of brick and stone construction. In Halbstadt, the residence of Heinrich Willms is done in Italian Renaissance architectural style. This very large home—the

ground floor alone contained over seven thousand square feet—is in relatively good shape. Its uses during the past decades have been many, including housing the offices of the local Communist Party. Near Halbstadt is the former village of Fürstenau, with the former estate of Wilhelm and Maria Neufeld. Today only hints remain of this grand residence, which was decorated in Victorian style and included a dining room with a table that could seat fifty people.

The church buildings constructed by Mennonites have not survived as well as some of the schools, factories and estate residences. Some, like the Mennonite Brethren Church in Alexandertal (Molotschna) have been turned into village centers. Others have become storage sheds (Petershagen, Molotschna) or factories (Rückenaу Mennonite Brethren Church, Molotschna). Many are broken down and empty shells. The large Margenau congregational building (near Landskrone, Molotschna), constructed in 1910 in the Gothic style, is now only four walls that shakily stand. The flooring, roof and windows are gone. The Schönsee church building (Molotschna) of 1909 was once one of the most ornate church buildings. Also built in Gothic style, it included frescoes on the ceiling by an Italian painter. Today its roof, windows and flooring are also gone. The most grand of the Russian Mennonite churches in Ukraine was the Einlage Mennonite Church. The purest of the Mennonite Gothic-designed church buildings, it even included a rose window. This imposing structure, like everything else in Einlage, was destroyed in the late 1920s when the large dam was built on the Dnieper River at Zaporozhye.

The emotional impact of standing in these broken-down

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-