

# Mennonite documents from the St. Petersburg archives: New resources for telling an old story

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has allowed for unprecedented access by western researchers to archival records in Russia and other countries formerly a part of the Soviet Union. Among the records brought to light in this way have been a large collection of documents relating to Mennonites from the State Archives located at the University of St. Petersburg. These records of the Russian Senate (Duma) date from 1789 to 1917. They provide a new perspective on Mennonites in Russia during the imperial era.

The records were discovered by researchers from the St. Petersburg Christian University. In 1995 personnel from the University contacted Mennonite historians in North America about the possibility of microfilming the records. Four Mennonite organizations in North America agreed to provide funding for this project: the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia, the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno, the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg, and the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg. The filming was completed in 1997, and copies placed in each of the four archives. The entire collection consists of thirty microfilm rolls.

Preliminary inventories of the records have been compiled, and are available in the four archives mentioned above. Translation of selected documents also has begun. The two documents published here are from the St. Petersburg collection. The first, an 1802 letter from Samuel Contentius to Cornelius Warkentin, was translated by John B. Toews, a professor of history at Regent University in Vancouver, British Columbia. Dr. Toews also wrote the introduction to this document. The second, a 1912 government document lamenting an amusingly narrow Mennonite perspective on Russian geography, was translated by Andrey Ivanov. Andrey is a Fresno Pacific University student from Zaporozhye, Ukraine, who is working as a translator in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies.

## **Samuel Contentius to the Elder and Minister of the Mennonite Churches Cornelius Warkentin<sup>1</sup> of Rosenort near Elbing. 22 August 1802.**

[Born in Germany in the mid-eighteenth-century, Samuel Contentius sought his fortune abroad by entering Russian state service in 1785. He served in the diplomatic corps for a decade and was sent on various missions. Subsequently he spent some years with the government geography department in Riga. In 1800 Contentius was appointed as the head of the newly-created Office of Guardianship for Foreign Settlers in New Russia. This agency, often called the Supervisory Commission, was first located in Yekaterinoslav. Its intended role was to address the difficulties experienced by foreign settlers in the southern lands newly conquered by Russia.

As head of the Supervisory Commission, Contentius

immediately turned his attention to the administrative and economic chaos that plagued the foreign settlements in New Russia. In addition to German colonists, settlers from Sweden, Bulgaria, Greece and Rumania needed his support and patronage. Initially Contentius focused on the establishment of forests, the cultivation of gardens and the planting of trees in the villages. With regard to the new Mennonite settlement in Chortitza, Contentius developed a twofold strategy aimed at coping with the inadequate rainfall and the sandy and impoverished soil. First, he emphasized economic diversification, which aimed at developing household industries that utilized available raw materials. Second, he encouraged the raising of cattle, horses and Merino sheep of Spanish extraction. All these animals thrived on the native grasses that covered the hills and valleys of the Chortitza settlement. His letter to elder Warkentin clearly summarizes these priorities.<sup>2</sup>

Available documentation suggests that Samuel Contentius was highly respected and loved by the early Mennonite settlers.<sup>3</sup> Obviously the admiration was mutual, at least according to the following letter. Contentius had hardly begun to work at his new post when, in consultation with the governor of Odessa, he offered prospective Mennonite settlers in Prussia an extension of the extraordinary privileges that brought their co-religionists to New Russia a decade earlier. In a very real sense he was the master architect of the Molotschna Mennonite settlement begun in 1804,<sup>4</sup> and certainly the 1802 promise of the "best . . . crown lands" was more than kept with regard to this colony.

Shortly after his retirement in March 1818, Contentius accompanied Tsar Alexander I on a visit to the Molotschna colony, which then boasted forty villages and some seven thousand inhabitants. Not long after he was reappointed as an honorary member of the Supervisory Commission. In 1821 the Tsar granted him the status of Privy Councillor. He received several additional honors before his death in 1830.]

Some time ago the elder and teacher of the Chortitza Mennonite Church, David Epp, informed me that your reverence wished to correspond with me. I can think of no better way to signify my willingness to do so, than with this letter. The boundless trust that your co-religionists here place in you and the overall respect with which they regard you, have intensified my desire to become better acquainted with a worthy man like you, a man about whom I have heard so many good and praiseworthy things.

The fact that some two hundred families of your Mennonite faith have decided to settle in this region means that we need a preliminary specific agreement, and that the necessary preparations be made for their settlement here. I need to confer extensively about this with

your reverence. Your concern about their welfare and your willingness to champion their cause will involve extensive correspondence.

By letter the Chortitza district office asked:

first, if two hundred Mennonite families could be settled in this region. Second, if they would be granted the same privileges and third, would they receive the same loans that their co-religionists obtained earlier?

I presented your concerns to his excellency, governor Count von Miklashevsky, and received the following reply:

First, he is well aware of the diligence with which the Mennonites here practice agriculture and cattle raising. He is also aware of their experimentation with other useful pursuits suitable to this climate. He would not only be willing to welcome two hundred, but several thousand Mennonite families, and is willing to reserve the best as-yet unspecified crown lands for them. Many people from the heavily-populated regions of the Russian Empire as well as Greek and Bulgarian families are coming to the region in large numbers. His excellency therefore felt that if Mennonites were inclined to come here they should decide as soon as possible and let him know how many families to expect. If there were several thousand families it would be necessary to reserve the best lands for them. Second, the new settlers would be granted the right to enjoy the same wonderful privileges granted their co-religionists who have already settled here. Third, would the arriving Mennonites obtain the same crown loans as those who settled earlier? His excellency has approved such loans and has attempted to estimate the living and travel costs for each Mennonite family. He has set the loan at 1300 rubles, a handsome sum! This is especially surprising in light of the fact that the many Greeks and Bulgarians who are arriving receive less than three hundred rubles per family. When you realize they are receiving less than a fourth of the sum [available to the Mennonites] it becomes clear what the state is willing to do for them.

In light of the above I hope your reverence will not be offended if I offer my own opinions on the matter. You should alert your co-religionists to the remarkable difference in settlement allocations between Greek and Mennonite families. They are being offered much more generous terms.

I should also like to make a suggestion in the interests of reducing settlement costs. Where building stone is available (and there is a plentiful supply in many locations in this region), it should be used for house construction. If stone is unavailable, build small, less costly homes in the foreign style. If we were to follow a timber style (*Fachwerk*) we would need sixty beams per house. Each would cost seven rubles if they had to be transported for several hundred *verst*<sup>5</sup>, a total of 420 rubles. A good house using

a small foreign design could be built for half that price.

Your very reverence was here six years ago in order to gain some knowledge about the region. No one could portray the land's fertility, the mild climate and the various means of livelihood that this blessed land offers to your co-religionists better than you. More than a million people of both genders now inhabit the land, and the general economy is beginning to flourish. You can also reassure your co-religionists that, if necessary, a half million *Morgen*<sup>6</sup> of land will be divided and held in readiness for them. In order to take advantage of the generous terms offered by the state we must move as quickly as possible. All of your co-religionists who wish to come here need to get organized. In order to facilitate this, those families who wish to settle here should be divided into three categories:

1. The number of needy families who have few means should be listed.
2. Those families with moderate means who require less support should be listed.
3. Those families who only need land and no support should be listed.

Your wisdom and experience will make it easy to categorize such families. I beg your very reverence to take on this task and after some time provide me with precise information.

The district office and Chortitza elder Wiebe, together with several insightful men, have consulted about this matter and concluded that a poor family would need 560 rubles in addition to food and travel expenses. If that amount suffices for a poor family, half that amount should be enough for a family with some means. Since those with means do not need any supplement, we only have to worry about these two groups. If, after discussing the matter with your co-religionists, your very reverence responded to this question, you would have prepared the pathway for thousands of your co-religionists and assured their well-being in the Russian Empire.

Experience has taught us that those families with grown children and energetic household members rapidly achieve prosperity. By contrast, young families, especially those consisting only of man and wife, remain impoverished for a long time—even to this day. They received the same loans as the others, but they lack farm workers. If one or both of them become ill the farm operations cease altogether. Young families need to bring hired men and maids with them. There should be no fewer than four members of both genders for each family.

With regard to the travel route, I would suggest that the Mennonites desiring to come here journey via Gradno, Berdiczew and Elisabethgrad. It is the shortest way. Once they cross the Russian border to Gradno, they are only thirty miles from their destination. Also, they do not have

to traverse the territory of the Roman Empire (Austrian Empire), which is not advisable. [If they follow the suggested] route, their journey will encounter no delays.

In order to accommodate the arriving Mennonites and to secure the most desirable lands for them, it is essential that they elect two or three knowledgeable men to inspect the available crown lands and select the best for their co-religionists. I have already discussed this matter with the Chortitza elder, who has agreed to do so.

I must inform your reverence of an imperial edict issued on January 31 of this year. According to its provisions it is possible for a farmer to purchase such lands as become available. I think this will appeal to the capitalists among your co-religionists. These are lands that do not have hereditary serfs attached to them.

Your reverence can understand that the contents of this letter must be guarded with caution and not broadcast too widely. I do not wish to promote misunderstandings or anger elsewhere by appearing to entice strangers into leaving their fatherland. That is not my desire, nor can it ever be. I conferred with his excellency because Chortitza Mennonites constantly asked me if their co-religionist friends and relatives in foreign lands could share their good fortune of living in the Russian Empire. In this matter I could respond to the how and what of their inquiries. If you so desire I can provide your reverence with more information on the matter. Write to me once you receive this letter and have thoroughly conferred about the issues and formulated a response. Tell me about every item that you have discussed as soon as possible. I beg your reverence to also inform the Chortitza elder Johann Wiebe of your response to me.

Finally, I want you to inform your co-religionists who wish to come here of my opinion as to how best the Mennonites can prosper in this region. One could accomplish this by emulating the industriousness of the Mennonites who once lived in Wishinka and have now settled in crown lands. I know that your reverence visited them when you were here six years ago and observed their diligence. In spring, after they have completed their farm labors, they work on their gardens. The entire winter is spent manufacturing goods from the raw materials that the region produces. Thanks to the quality of the land and the [benevolent] climate in this region, less time is needed for soil preparation. Fertilization is not needed and so the farmer needs to spend much less time in active agricultural work. He has a good deal of time throughout the year to devote himself to various crafts. The region produces such raw materials as wool, skins and lime in abundance, and processing them could bring substantial returns. It would be advantageous to recruit cloth makers, tanners, soap makers and builders capable of erecting Dutch-style mills. They would practice these trades in the colonies and train Mennonite youth in these crafts. Gardeners, who are in short supply, could make a very

useful contribution. There are some linen weavers here but more are needed, especially those who make table-linen.

Sheep raising and sheep breeding are profitable pursuits. It would be of great benefit to the colonies if those intent on coming here would bring with them as many Spanish rams and ewes as possible. You are acquainted with the Mennonite Barg from Chortitza. He has raised eleven sheep from a single pair he brought here several years ago. Each sheep produces two rubles worth of wool.

The Chortitza district has been enlarged by 24,000 *Morgen* of land so that cattle and sheep production can be considerably expanded. A good beginning has been made with fruit and wine production, and some experiments with raising silk worms have proved successful. If it were possible for you to send some young grafted Berstorfen apple trees to the Mennonites here, they would be very grateful.

I remain,  
Contentius

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Warkentin (1740-1809) was minister and elder of the Rosenort congregation in West Prussia. In 1794 he, together with elder Cornelius Regehr of Heubuden, traveled to Chortitza to help the newly-arrived colonists organize their church life. See Peter Hildebrand, *Erste Auswanderung der Mennoniten aus dem Danziger Gebiet nach Südrussland* (Halbstadt: P. Neufeld, 1888), p. 67; Peter M. Friesen, *Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789-1910)* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911), pp. 47ff, 73-74, 134-137

<sup>2</sup> A copy of this letter is preserved in Fond 383, Opis 29, Dielo 0210 in the State Archives of St. Petersburg University.

<sup>3</sup> See D. H. Epp, "Samuel Contentius: ein unvergesslicher Wohltäter der Kolonien Südrusslands," *Unser Blatt* 3 (Feb. 1928): 107-109, and M. R., "Staatsrat Kontenius," *Heimatbuch der Deutschen aus Russland* (1958): 147-154.

<sup>4</sup> A sample of Contentius' thoroughness can be found in his reports, published in A. Klaus, *Unsere Kolonien* (Odessa: L. Nitzsche, 1887), appendix I-II.

<sup>5</sup> A Russian measurement of distance equal to 1.07 kilometers or .66 miles.

<sup>6</sup> A Prussian land measurement equal to .255 hectares or .631 acres.



**Report from the government inspection of the Mennonite educational institutions of Tavrishesk gubernia, Southern Russia, 31 March 1912.**

[from Fond 821, Opis 5, Dielo 1043, State Archives of St. Petersburg University].

The problem of the teaching of geography and history in German schools was recently mentioned by the educational inspector of Perekop (Crimea). He wrote,

Today little attention is paid toward teaching Russian history and geography in the German schools of southern Russia. Although geography is studied for a lengthy period, during my inspection of several schools most sixth-grade students could not locate Travrichesk gubernia on a map, did not know the capital cities, and did not know where His Majesty the Emperor lived.

Similar reports have been received from other locations. The inspector of the Berdyansk-Melitopol district reported that Mennonites in the Molotschna colony had published their own textbook for teaching the geography of the Motherland. In fact, it only describes the geography of the Molotschna colony. The book is entitled *Hilfsbüchlein beim ersten Unterricht in Heimatkunde* [A Handbook for the Introductory Teaching of Local History and Topography], and is published in Leipzig by Brockhaus. It is designed for use in the schools of the Gnadenfeld and Halbstadt volosts, and is intended to teach what the Mennonites call "the geography of the Motherland." The classes are held in the German language. Based on the contents of the *Hilfsbüchlein*, however, it is not the "Motherland's geography," but rather the geography of the German colonies in Russia. For the French people the Motherland is France, for Germans—it is Germany, and for Russians—Russia, but for the Mennonites near Berdyansk—the Motherland is the Halbstadt and Gnadenfeld volosts!

The book does not contain any information about Russia; it would seem that the Mennonite colonies were outside Russia. The nearest Russian villages are mentioned either accidentally (on page 3, when mentioning the village of Troitzkoye), or with regard to the Russian workers from various places who are employed by the colonists.

On page 3 of the chapter entitled, "*Gehankenreisen*," the author suggests taking a "mental journey" through Russia as follows:

Let's imagine that we are going east from Tiede. First, we will arrive in Blumenort. If we continue east we will go through Rosenort, Tiegerweide, Rückenau, Nikolaidorf, Paulsheim and Gnadenfeld. To the east of Gnadenfeld is Grossweide. Terek is to the east of Tiede. There are many Mennonites there. Asia is located further to the east. There are Mennonites in Turkestan, Pavlodar and Barnaul. To the west from Tiede is Ohrloff. Going west from Ohrloff we will pass Blumenstein, Troitzkoye and Fedorovka. The railroad station at Fedorovka belongs to the Mennonites. Further to the west is a place called Sagradowka. There are seventeen Mennonite colonies there. To the west from Sagradowka lie Austria, Germany, Spain and Portugal.

The chairman of the government inspection meeting reported that

such teaching of "the Motherland's geography" by Germans can be disturbing for Russians, who share the same Motherland. While visiting a German school in Neu-Halbstadt, I noticed that students knew a lot about the colonies in Siberia, Samara and Saratov Trakt. They could even name the different villages there and give information about them. But when I asked what they knew about the neighboring town of Gross Tokmak, they did not know what to say.

Based on these reports, the meeting concluded with a resolution to increase the teaching of Russian history and geography. Furthermore, inspectors are responsible for ensuring that these classes would be taught in Russian rather than German.

## Volume 2 of GRANDMA CD-ROM now available

The California Mennonite Historical Society's Genealogy Project Committee is pleased to announce that the second volume of GRANDMA (the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry) is now available for purchase. Distributed on CD-ROM, the new volume contains 267,864 names of persons whose ancestral lines can be traced to Mennonite communities in Poland and Russia.

Also included on the CD are:

- New maps of South Russia and Prussia, ship list indexes for Mennonite immigrants from Russia to North America
- scanned images of B. H. Unruh's book, *Die niederlaendisch-niederdeutschen Hintergrunde der mennonitische Ostwanderungen im 16., 18., und 19. Jahrhundert* (Part II only)
- photographs of selected persons in the GRANDMA database
- Software for viewing the contents of the CD, including Brother's Keeper (both DOS and Windows versions), GedTool, and image viewer programs.

It is not necessary to purchase volume 1 in order to use the new volume, since all genealogical data from the first volume is included on the second.

The database is designed to be used with existing commercial genealogy software programs. We strongly recommend Brother's Keeper, which is distributed as