CMHS Helps Lift the Veil On History in Russia and Ukraine

by Paul Toews

Peter Klassen, Historical Society Chair, and I were among a small group of Americans that participated in an international conference May 26-30 that lifted a 70-year veil of silence on Mennonite history in Ukraine.

"Khortitsa 99: Mennonites in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, was held in the city of Zaporizhzhia, which now incorporates the old Mennonite village of Khortitsa. Three related events took place: an academic conference, an exhibition at the Zaporizhzhia Museum of Regional Studies and the unveiling of two markers to memorialize the Mennonite presence in the region. The events brought together scholars from Canada, the United States, Germany, Russia and the Ukraine.

Mennonites first settled the Zaporizhzhia region in 1789. They built thriving communities and also made many contributions to the economic, religious, cultural and political development of the southern Ukraine. With the onset of the Soviet regime, those contributions disappeared from the history of the region and with the Second World War, Mennonites also virtually disappeared from the region.

"Khortitsa 99" was the first public discussion of the Mennonite story in Russia and Ukraine in more than 70 years. At the academic conference 27 papers were read. Fourteen of those were prepared by Ukrainian and Russian scholars. These scholars (mostly younger) were using archival sources that have long been hidden and inaccessible to Western scholars. Here was a new generation of Russian and Ukrainian scholars moving beyond Marxist interpretations of the Mennonite story in Russia. They recognize that the role of the Mennonites, and other minority groups, was critical to the evolution of Ukrainian society. Their research and writing about Mennonites is a means to fill in some of the blank spaces in Ukrainian history.

There was a wonderful sense of openness and even unity between peoples of different nationalities and religious confessions. That unity arose partly from the memory of similar experiences that engulfed many peoples during the period when Ukraine was under Soviet domination. Attending the various events of "Khortitsa 99" were representatives from the office of the Deputy Premier of Ukraine and many regional and local officials and from the Baptist Union of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Their embrace of the Mennonite story was moving. Two comments were illustrative of the sentiments expressed by many.
The Orthodox priest of the village of Nieder Khortitsa, site of the unveiling of one of the memorial markers, stated that "I as a Ukrainian am ashamed of what happened to Mennonites in this land. All confessions must be made to live in peace... I wish that Mennonites would return and live here in peace." Professor Fedor Truchenko, dean of the history faculty at Zaporizhzhia State University, was even more pointed: "A few months ago only a handful of people in Ukraine knew about Mennonites. For the past four days we have been discussing difficult issues in our history. After this conference, thousands, no millions, will know of the history of Mennonites in this country. What happened to Mennonites was wrong. They were driven from this region after the fall of the Soviet Union. Opening of these archives, it has become clear that there are vast materials that will offer a new development of our state. We will restore them to their rightful place in the history of this region."

Our historical society is seeking to do its part to achieve Professor Truchenko's goal. We are deeply involved in the retrieval of documentary records from various Russian and Ukrainian archival agencies. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of these archives, it has become clear that there are vast materials that will offer a new basis for the study and interpretation of the Mennonite story in Russia. The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, through the support of the CMHS, has already acquired significant materials from archives in St. Petersburg, Russia, and Odessa and Simferopol, Ukraine. We continue to work with these and other archives to retrieve the story of Mennonites in Russia and Ukraine. 

"History in Russia..." continued

The Mennonite Quarterly Review

Growth of Historical Conferences Reflects Renewed Interest in Polish-Prussian Story

Part of the renewed interest in the Polish-Prussian chapter of Mennonite history has been reflected in the holding of scholarly conferences devoted to this theme. From July 21-24, 1990, a symposium, "Mennonites in Poland and Prussia," was held in Winnipeg, drew scholars from Germany, Poland, the United States and Canada. Original plans called for the conference to take place in Fresno; however, in view of the fact that the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) was scheduled to convene in Winnipeg, organizers of the conference decided to hold their sessions in the same city, immediately prior to the MWC meetings.

In a further gesture of broad support, John Oyer, editor of the Mennonite Quarterly Review, invited the MPFA to have session papers published in that journal. The articles appeared in the April 1992 issue, with John Friesen and Peter Klassen as guest editors. Another conference, this one held in Nowy Dwor (Tiegenhof), Poland, and organized primarily by Polish organizations, demonstrated that the Mennonite story was receiving increased Polish interest. In 1997, on the occasion of the 1000th anniversary of the founding of Danzig/Gdansk, a historical society in Nowy Dwor sponsored a symposium on "Everyday Life of the Mennonites in the Werder." MPFA was invited to participate, and Peter Klassen presented a paper on Mennonite emigration from the Werder. In addition, our association contributed financially to cover local expenses. Other participants, besides those from Poland, came from Germany and the Netherlands. Special recognition was given to the Dutch for their stellar role in restoring cemeteries. The presence at the conference of the the Dutch Consul General in Gdansk reflected the growing Dutch interest in Poland, especially the Gdansk region, with its many historical ties to Amsterdam and other Dutch centers.