

Emigration to New Russia: Complications and Challenges

By Andrey Ivanov

Editor's Note: In the 1780s, Mennonites in the former Royal Prussia, now called West Prussia, began to seek new options as the Prussian government issued decrees forbidding further acquisition of land by Mennonites who continued to reject military service.

Efforts to emigrate to New Russia, as it was then designated, met with official opposition, although sometimes government agencies seemed uncertain about their policies. Thus, a Berlin government communiqué, dated 6 March 1788, reprimanded Prussian authorities when it stated "we do not understand how the West Prussian administration could have decided to give Mennonites hope that they will be allowed to emigrate," since this would be "detrimental" to the area.

Several hundred Mennonites, however, continued to press for emigration, and in 1788 a major exodus was in progress. It was encouraged by George Trappe, an official acting on behalf of Prince Gregor Potemkin, governor of New Russia. The engraving below shows Trappe holding a copy of the "Privilegium" granted to Mennonites by Catherine the Great. The text reads: Der Kayserinn Catharinen der Grossen Privilegia für 270 Mennonisten Familien im Jahr 1787.

Mennonite historian Irvin B. Horst acquired the portrait at an auction in Haarlem, the Netherlands. It is shown here by courtesy of the Menno Simons Historical Library, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia.



Immigration has long been a significant part of the Mennonite story. The decision whether or not to migrate was often accompanied by complicated negotiations between the Mennonites and government officials, or between officials of the countries involved. This process clearly occurred during the early 1800s, as shown by the lengthy correspondence between Russian consuls, Mennonite elders and Prussian magistrates and other officials about the necessity of migration. For the most part these debates were settled with some consensus. Following are some of the examples of such correspondence that portray problems faced by the Mennonites while emigrating to Southern Russia. All of these documents are part of the St. Petersburg Archives records that

have been microfilmed and are now available in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno.

Collection No. 398, File 261, and Collection No. 383, Files 259 and 263, of the St. Petersburg Archives contain a series of such correspondence between the Russian consulates in Danzig, Königsberg and Russian government officials such as the Supervisor of Ministry of Internal Affairs Viktor P. Kochubey, the Supervisor of the Guardians' Committee Kontenius and the Odessa governor Duke Emmanuel O. Richelieu.

Discussions between Consul Trefurt and the Mennonite elder Cornelius Warkentin from the Elbing area, illustrate the problems that Mennonites faced while leaving Prussia. Correspondence was conducted secretly; letters were sent through private

couriers, since Chairman Beim of the Elbing Magistracy was strongly opposed to Mennonite migration from Prussia. Warkentin reported that many had decided to leave, mainly because they had received good news from Russia, including reports about fertile land and a progressive economy. At the same time, however, some Mennonites reportedly complained about harsh weather and hard living conditions. Emmanuel Richelieu, in his correspondence with Trefurt, had confirmed that some of these rumors might be true. He confirmed, for instance, that many settlers did not receive enough wood for construction and heating.

Meanwhile, as Elder Warkentin reported, "The Prussian government continues

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threatening those who want to leave. It has promised to confiscate half of all property and possessions of every emigrant. It also continues the policy of attracting more colonists from Württemberg, giving them money and free lumber in order to outnumber Mennonites in that area."

Despite these restrictions, many more wanted to leave. Some, however, decided to look in places other than Russia. Warkentin wrote about a group that had gone to Pennsylvania. The group came back and reported that the land was quite good and abundant, but that the government did not offer any financial assistance or tax exemptions. Although three families had emigrated to America, most people considered it foolish to go so far when no financial support was available.

Russia seemed to be the most promising option, but it still would be a problem to organize and leave secretly for Riga, where Russian officials would meet the group. However, after the negotiations between the Consuls Trefurt (Danzig), Dufour (Königsberg) and local authorities, some groups were allowed to leave. Both Trefurt and Kochubey stated that this would not be achieved without elder Warkentin's participation. Because of his accomplishments, he was invited to St. Petersburg, where he would be accepted into the Russian elite as a crown-paid nobleman. He was also offered a medallion acknowledging his accomplishments. Warkentin responded that he could receive the medallion, but could not come to the capital because he was very old, and his health condition would not allow him to travel anywhere.

In 1818 Danzig's Consul Trefurt retired and the new Consul

Heydeken was appointed. One of the main issues of concern to Mennonite elders was whether growing scarcity of lands in New Russia would limit immigration. Vice Consul Makarovich responded that Mennonite immigration would be limited to two hundred families a year. The land situation in New Russia appeared to be difficult indeed. At that time there were about five thousand Württembergers in Molotschna seeking land on which to settle. After negotiations, however, the Guardians' Committee decided to keep the remaining land in Molotschna for Prussian Mennonites, and the Württembergers were sent to Georgia. The Guardians' Committee decided to provide about 100,000 rubles a year for the expenses of Mennonite migration, allowing no more than 878.40 rubles per family in their settlement funds.

In 1820 the Russian government restricted all further immigration, because very little free land was available in Southern Russia. However, Königsberg Consul Dufour reassured Mennonites that these restrictions would not apply to them, because the monarch was very satisfied with their progress and performance in agriculture.

Another set of documents deals with the problems Mennonite migrants encountered during their migration to Russia. Some Mennonites died on their way, others got lost. The government had promised to give as much assistance as possible, including guides and carriages. It also promised to exempt all migrants from paying customs duty on goods and property brought in Russia. In late spring of 1820, however, the Guardians' Committee received a complaint from a group of Mennonites. They claimed that while crossing the Nuretz River, they were charged a customs duty of 6 reichstaler per

carriage. The Committee responded that customs could not charge that amount, and these were probably imposters wearing customs uniforms. This complaint was filed with the Bielostok police department, who investigated the matter. They discovered that the Mennonites had crossed a bridge that belonged to two former customs workers by the names of Tobias Lienn and Itzka Schapiro. Lienn and Schapiro claimed that they charged only 6 groschen (3 kopecks) per carriage as a private bridge fee. Mennonites said that the charge was 6 reichstaler, and demanded their money back. The investigation failed to show who actually lied about the charge.

Another similar conflict was reported when Johann Penner and Isaac Nickel filed a police complaint against a man who, pretending to be a customs worker, took 24 reichstaler from Penner, and 45 from Nickel. Police promised to find this person, but encouraged Mennonites to be more careful with trusting their money to anybody who did not carry a customs worker identification document.

A different kind of conflict took place in 1804 when a group of Mennonites was travelling through Volhynia on their way to Ekaterinoslav. Late at night, they decided to stop at the tavern in the Jewish village of Schuleiki. While staying at the tavern they refused to obey the advice of tavern owner Schmuhl Leisorovich not to smoke. They smoked and burned candles all night. Eventually an accident occurred, and the tavern was burned down. Schmuhl filed a police complaint against the Mennonites, and the government reimbursed Leisorovich for his loss. That amount was charged as a debt to be paid off by these Mennonites after they had established themselves in Molotschna.

By 1845 the scarcity of lands in South Russia had in-

creased, and the Guardians' Committee was considering other areas for Mennonite settlement. One of those areas was a tract of over eight hundred desyatin of swampy land around St. Petersburg. City authorities wrote about this offer to elder Peter Froese of Tiegerweide, Prussia. Only two people, Peter Dyck and Peter Berg, volunteered to go. The Guardians' Committee opposed this idea, because two Mennonites would not make any difference economically. What was needed was a colony. In addition, without any prayer houses or cultural activities, these two would quickly lose their Mennonite identity. Therefore, the Committee advised that Dyck and Berg be settled in Southern Russia, where they would be closer to their co-believers.

Another alternative for Mennonite settlement was made available in the Samara region. With the founding of the Trakt (1853 ff.) and Alexandertal (1859 ff.) colonies, Mennonites who wished to emigrate from Prussia had new options available to them.

Annual Meeting to Feature Mary Sprunger

The California Mennonite Historical Society Executive Committee is pleased to announce that Dr. Mary Sprunger, Associate Professor of History at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, will be the featured speaker at our annual meeting.

This event is scheduled for Saturday, April 15, 2000. Watch for further details early next year.

The Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association

One of the organizations involved in strengthening understanding between Mennonites and Poles is the Mennonite-Polish Friendship Association (MPFA).

In 1987, following discussions with a number of persons, a letter was sent to a broad spectrum of potentially interested persons and agencies. The purpose was to determine the level of interest in building bridges of understanding between Mennonites and those Poles now living in areas once home to hundreds of Mennonites. Sensitive issues associated with the Danzig Free State, World War II and the eventual flight/expulsion of Mennonites from lands along the Vistula demanded a careful, conciliatory approach.

Response to the letter was overwhelmingly positive. Representatives of the Mennonite World Conference and the Mennonite Central Committee viewed this as a promising development. Numerous historians, church leaders and persons who had lived in Poland or Prussia before World War II wrote to express their support.

Steps were taken to formalize this proposal. A statement of purpose delineated the goals and potential activities of the proposed organization. An international advisory board, with representation from Canada, Germany, Poland and the United States illustrated the desired diversity of those who might wish to support this effort. A three-member executive committee (Peter Klassen [Fresno], president; John Friesen [Winnipeg],

vice president; and Paul Toews [Fresno], secretary-treasurer) provided early leadership.

One of the first proposals discussed was a scholarly conference to examine various facets of Mennonite-Polish history and relationships. The idea received immediate support. Soon, the Centers for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno and Winnipeg, the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg, as well as the Historical Commission of the Mennonite Brethren General Conference agreed to cooperate in planning such a conference. The resulting symposium was held on July 21-24, 1990.

In subsequent years, the MPFA has sponsored or helped sponsor a number of projects:

- Unveiling of a historical marker in the former Mennonite church in Gdańsk.
- Providing financial support for fencing and beginning restoration of the Mennonite cemetery in Heubuden (Stogi) in the Vistula delta.
- Giving financial support for Mennonite displays in the Elblag City Museum.
- Assisting in a cultural conference on Mennonite life in the Vistula Delta, held in Nowy Dwor (Tiegenhof) in celebration of the 1000th anniversary of Danzig/Gdańsk (1997).
- Providing financial support for the printing of brochures about Mennonite life in the Vistula Delta (1999).

In recent years, the MPFA has developed close working relationships with cooperating agencies in the Netherlands and Poland.