

A Story . . .

“[my grandfather’s] parents made the famous trek to Central Asia from the Mennonite Molotschna Colony in South Russia in 1880.”

at the time, so his memories are anecdotal at best, but his story adds details that I have not found in other sources.

He said that he and his family traveled to witness the newsworthy event, even though they did not belong to Epp’s congregation. A platform had been constructed in the center of a large field, and a large congregation of witnesses had gathered, seated on blankets on the ground around the platform. At the proper moment, Claas Epp appeared, dressed in flowing white robes and stood atop the platform.

The day slowly passed without any sign of a miracle, and the crowd became more and more restless. Finally, late in the afternoon, many in the congregation began to shout their displeasure and started to dismantle (my grandfather said “tear down”) the platform. Chuckling a bit, grandpa recalled that Epp tumbled down onto the ground and hastily retreated from the scene. Again, this account comes from one who was only eight when he witnessed it, but it does provide a very personal eyewitness report. Other sources finish the story by saying that Epp subsequently lost most of his followers and died in obscurity in 1913.

In another event of historical significance in Mennonite Brethren history, my grandfather gave his own report about his grandfather’s death. According to the Peters Family Bible, Elder Abraham Peters died on February 4, 1882 in Tashkent, Central Asia, at the relatively young age of forty-nine. My grandfather related that his parents told him (he himself had not yet

been born) that on his deathbed, Elder Peters instructed his followers to join the Mennonite Brethren Church. This “death-bed” instruction is not found in any other sources. In fact, Elder Peters’ death date is not found in any known record other than the Peters Family Bible. The other sources document the establishment of two churches after Peters’ death: the Romanovka Mennonite Church and the Nikolaipol Mennonite Brethren Church. In any event, grandpa’s story may give some explanation for the sudden emergence of a Mennonite Brethren congregation in the Central Asia area.

These are some of the stories that my grandfather told me. They bring the history of the Mennonites in Russia out of a “far away and long ago” mentality into an “up close and personal” framework.

Note: If this excursion into family tradition and historical reminiscence has struck a familiar note or reminded you of events in your own family’s memories, we invite you to write them down and submit them to the CMHS Bulletin for consideration as future articles. E-mail your stories to the editor at hope.nisly@fresno.edu.

ENDNOTES

1 For accounts of this event, see Franz Bartsch’s account, *Our Trek to Central Asia* as translated by Gerhard Ens and Elizabeth Peters (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications and Manitoba Historical Society, 1993); and Fred Richard Belk’s book *The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia, 1880-1884* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976).

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