

## THE GERMAN-RUSSIAN TENSIONS AMONG THE MENNONITES IN RUSSIA (1789-1917)

Harry Loewen

In the Foreword to this monumental work on the Mennonites in Russia, P.M. Friesen states:

To that I wish to add that, over a period of forty years as a consequence of my profession, the German and Russian languages have vied for supremacy with one another in me, and there was a time when my German did not want to flow properly.<sup>1</sup>

This statement, written more than a hundred years after the Mennonites left Prussia for the steppes of southern Russia, reveals more about the German-speaking Mennonites than appears on the surface. It tells us not only about the difficulties that the historian and author P.M. Friesen faced in writing his story, but it reveals more significantly the tension that existed between the German-Mennonite oriented feeling and way of life on the one hand, and the pressure, however indirect and subtle, that the Russian environment exerted on the settlers on the other. For Mennonite intellectuals like P.M. Friesen, the Russian language and culture were most attractive, and they felt that their fellow Mennonites should appreciate and accept the language and culture of their adopted country. The interesting fact, however, is that P.M. Friesen did not write his history in Russian but in German, the language that was generally understood and dear to the hearts of his would-be readers.<sup>2</sup> In reading P.M. Friesen's book one has the feeling that however awkward and stilted his German often is, the "souls" of both the author and the people of whom he wrote could best be expressed in the German language.

It is the purpose of this essay to trace the tension that existed between the German and Russian languages and ways of life among the Mennonites of Russia, probe into the reasons for the Mennonites' resistance to the Tsarist

government's efforts of russification, account for the Mennonites' relative success in maintaining the German language and their way of life for so long, and finally draw some conclusions from the study. The areas to be considered in which the German-Russian tension manifested itself most of all, were the Mennonites' contacts with their neighbours, their educational institutions, their missionary activities, their attitude to Tsarist Russia, their problems relating to conscription and alternative service, and, finally, questions with regard to their emigration.

*The Mennonites in Prussia.* For about 200 years before their migration to Russia, the Dutch Mennonites lived in Polish and later Prussian territories of the Vistula Delta. The Polish nobles and landowners extended to the industrious and useful Mennonites religious freedom and toleration. During the partitions of Poland in the 18th century, Danzig and West-Prussia came under the rule of the Hohenzollerns who were less tolerant toward the non-resistant aliens in their regions. The Mennonites in the Vistula Delta continued to speak Dutch, although with time their Dutch language was modified by the Low-German dialect spoken in the area.

Connections between Holland and the Danzig Mennonites, by correspondence and visits, remained strong as long as the Dutch language was used in church and in the home. The well-to-do Mennonites of Danzig even sent their sons to Amsterdam to complete their education or to learn a business. These young sons were often baptized in Holland before returning to West-Prussia.<sup>3</sup> In the 18th century, with a decline in contacts with the Netherlands, High German began to take the place of the Dutch language in the church services. As early as 1671 George Hansen lamented that the young people of West Prussia read German better than Dutch.<sup>4</sup> By the middle of the 18th century the Mennonite ministers began to preach in German, and after the death of the influential Hans van Steen in 1781, who spoke and wrote exclusively in Dutch, the change to German made more rapid progress. When in 1762 the minister of the Mennonite church of Danzig wished to preach the first German sermon in that city, he had to receive special permission, but the congregation, it is of interest to note, did not appreciate the sermon in the

German language. The first German Mennonite hymnal, replacing the Dutch, was printed in 1761, and in the 1780's the church records in Danzig were kept in German.<sup>5</sup> While the High German gradually invaded the Mennonite churches in West Prussia, in the homes Low German with Polish and German influences was spoken.

As far as the attitude of the Mennonites toward the Prussian rulers was concerned, the Mennonites remained submissive subjects in spite of the intolerance they experienced from local officials and from the Prussian kings. To say, as Frank Epp does, that there was among the Mennonites "a flirtation with German politics that had begun with the Fredericks of Prussia and which survived the Third Reich",<sup>6</sup> may be true in only rare instances. There is little evidence that patriotism existed among the Prussian Mennonites. The contrary seems to have been the rule. For example, when D. van Riesen became a Prussian soldier in 1815 without compulsion from the government, he was excommunicated and not readmitted because he did not show signs of true repentance. When legal steps were taken in the matter against the Mennonite Church, the Prussian courts ruled that van Riesen had no case against the church because he had acted contrary to church policies.<sup>7</sup> In general, the Mennonites in Prussia remained largely aliens even after 200 years of sojourn in that country. With the exception of a few enlightened rulers, notably Frederick II (the Great) who recognized and appreciated the usefulness of the Prussian Mennonites, the Mennonites were discriminated against economically, socially and religiously.<sup>8</sup> Thus when Catherine the Great of Russia invited German farmers and professional people to come to her vast fertile steppes in the south of her country, many Mennonites of the Vistula Delta saw in this the hand of God and responded enthusiastically to the call.

*The German-Mennonite Settlers in Russia.* In 1789 the first wave of Mennonites, largely the less well-to-do, left Prussia for their new home in what is today central Ukraine. The relationship between the first settlers and the Russian government officials was generally of a congenial nature although there were initial difficulties with regard to broken promises by the Russians and various misunderstandings. The Mennonites were given material assistance, large

tracks of land on both sides of the Dniepr River, privileges which ensured their religious practices, and freedom to establish their educational system and way of life. The Mennonites were practically given a free hand to establish their own state in Russia.

The connections with Prussia were at first kept alive through ever new waves of immigrants and through spiritual support from the homeland. Because the first settlers had no ministers among them, the Prussian churches felt responsible for the immigrants' spiritual life. Thus Elder Cornelius Warkentin came from Prussia to Chortitza in 1794 to organize Mennonite church life and extend to his brethren much-needed spiritual counsel. He was highly honoured by the Russian government and his efforts were appreciated by the Mennonite settlers. For the Mennonites colonists he was both a link between their old and new homes and a much-appreciated spiritual leader.<sup>9</sup> More than that, Elder Warkentin in a sense symbolized Prussian-Mennonite superiority and know-how with regard to church life and organization. It was thus natural that the Mennonites transplanted to their new home not only their religious institutions but also their Prussian practices in most areas of life. Add to this the complete isolation of the Mennonites in southern Russia, and it becomes understandable that in the first decades of their history in Russia there was no thought given to adopting any Russian customs and practices.

The Mennonites were not the only group that responded to the Russian Tsar's invitation to come to Russia. German colonists, mostly Lutherans and Catholics, came to live near the Mennonite settlements and along the Volga River. There was, however, from the outset some ambivalence about the national or ethnic difference between the Mennonites and the German colonists. A.A. Klaus, a 19th-century official in the Ministry of Crown Lands, differentiated between the Mennonites and the Germans.<sup>10</sup> David G. Rempel states categorically that "the term 'German' does not apply to the Mennonites, who constitute an entirely separate category of settlers. We request that our readers keep this in mind all along, since the current distinction between the German colonists and the Mennonites has been adopted in official acts as well as by

us.”<sup>11</sup> And E.K. Francis insists that the Mennonites in Russia “developed into a separate people, socially independent and clearly distinct from both the larger Russian society and other German-speaking colonies in that country.”<sup>12</sup>

While the Mennonites in Russia remained largely aloof not only from their Russian neighbours but also from the German colonists, there were many ties that united the Mennonites and Lutheran and Catholic German colonists. Both the Mennonites and the German settlers came from Germany; both groups spoke the German language and sought to preserve their language and ways of life; and both groups left Russia toward the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries for similar reasons. What separated the Mennonites from their German neighbours was their distinct faith, their long history of persecution, and their Low-German dialect; and while the German colonists sang their German songs with contents that praised their unknown land of origin,<sup>13</sup> the Mennonites sang their hymns in German also. Thus for all practical purposes the Mennonites were German Mennonites who thought of themselves as German Mennonite people with a distinct history and tradition. When Slavophiles later criticized the German-speaking groups in Russia, the Mennonites were included among those “aliens” who were considered to be Germans and sympathizers of the German fatherland. The fact that the Mennonites had developed a distinct Mennonite identity in Russia did not impress some of the nationally minded Russians in the least. The Mennonites, according to the Slavophiles, were a group of people who with the other German colonists had become prosperous in Russia at the expense of Russians.

*Mennonites and their Russian neighbours.* Since the Mennonite colonies were isolated from the Russian society and generally unfamiliar with the Russian language, they were inclined to hold back in a conversation with their Russian neighbours and in time even developed an attitude of distrust towards them. Moreover, from the very beginning Mennonites felt that Russian culture was inferior to their German culture, although this feeling changed among intellectuals toward the end of the 19th century. Frank Epp observes: “As difficult as had been the transition

from Dutch to German in Prussia, that acculturation was eventually recognized as a cultural advancement. In Russia there could only be a cultural debasement."<sup>14</sup> And Robert Kreider points out: "The surrounding Russian culture was of such an inferior socio-economic character, that it was distinctly disadvantageous for anyone to separate himself from the Mennonite colonies."<sup>15</sup> Both the Mennonites and the German colonists often thought of the Russians as lazy and more or less contemptible people.<sup>16</sup> Mennonite children were rarely given Russian names, although the Russian diminutives of at least some names were popular among the Mennonites.<sup>17</sup> The Russian servants and workers on Mennonite farms and in factories were merely hired labourers and the relationship between them and their Mennonite bosses was cool and sometimes strained. With time the younger Mennonites learned to sing some Russian folk songs and acquired the Russian language, but in general the Russian ways remained foreign to the Mennonites until the end of the 19th century.

*Mennonite education in Russia.* In the area of education the Mennonites in Russia sought to preserve and cultivate the German language as long as possible. According to C. Henry Smith, the primary aim of the whole educational system in Russia was "to perpetuate the German language and to save the children for the faith of the fathers."<sup>18</sup> Heinrich Heese, Sr., however, recognized the need for teaching and learning the Russian language in the Mennonite schools. Not only was he the first teacher to teach the Russian language, which incidentally, was much appreciated by Johann Cornies, but he was also, until his death in 1860, an enthusiastic Russian patriot.<sup>19</sup> Heinrich Franz, Sr., Heese's successor, was not as knowledgeable of the Russian language as Heese. P.M. Friesen writes of him:

Franz never really acquired an adequate command of the Russian language, especially in practical terms. It would appear that he also never was wholeheartedly devoted to it, and that it was more difficult for him than for Heese to learn to feel in Russian . . . . His language was an elegant, grammatically correct High German of the educated classes in Prussia . . . .<sup>20</sup>

As late as the mid-nineteenth century all subjects in

the Mennonite schools were taught in German, although in the 1870's the Mennonites began to realize that the days of the German language in their schools were numbered. With the pressure of russification upon them, the teachers of the Chortitza *Centralschule* decided "that the Russian language was no longer treated as a foreign language, but as a second mother tongue."<sup>21</sup> By agreeing to introduce the Russian language into their schools the Mennonites hoped to preserve their privileges, or, failing that, to modify the russification policies of the government. In a petition of November 15, 1875, for example, the Mennonites pleaded with the Russian government that they might be allowed to retain their privileges and educational system, adding, "... . At the same time we obligate ourselves, out of a sense of duty to our dear fatherland, to promote the language of the land with the greatest diligence."<sup>22</sup>

To meet the increasing demand for more qualified high school teachers, Mennonites began to attend teacher training institutes and universities in Russia and Western Europe, especially Germany. In the Russian universities Russian was the only language of communication, but the Mennonite students continued to speak High German and Low German among themselves.<sup>23</sup> However, when the Mennonites returned as teachers to their colonies they not only taught the literature of such Russian authors as Pushkin, Turgenev, Gogol, and Tolstoy, but they also contributed actively to promoting the Russian language in Mennonite secondary schools and teacher training institutions. P.M. Friesen, for example, was one such outstanding promoter of things Russian among the Mennonites of Russia.

It was, however, primarily the business activities of the Mennonites which drew the Mennonites and Russians closer together. Around 1900 the Mennonites established business enterprises in towns and cities throughout southern Russia. This extension of Mennonite business into the Russian communities registered the beginning of the end of Mennonite isolation in Russia. According to David Rempel, the Mennonite business families who established their homes in the Russian towns no longer sent their children to Chortitza, Halbstadt, Gnadenfeld or Ohrloff to attend Mennonite secondary schools; these children continued

their education in the gymnasia, schools of commerce, and other schools in the areas of their families' new abode.<sup>24</sup> With the knowledge of the Russian language, the breakdown of isolation, and an increasing material prosperity, Mennonites around the turn of the century began to undertake longer vacation trips to the Caucasian Mountains and the Crimea; however, trips to summer resorts in Switzerland and Germany were more common than travels to Russian vacation centres.<sup>25</sup>

*Mennonites and mission activities in Russia.* With regard to missions and evangelism among the Russian population there exists some misconception. It has been commonly assumed that since the Russian Tsars had prohibited proselytizing among the Russian Orthodox population, there was hardly any missionary activity by Mennonites in Russia. To be sure, Catherine the Great's Manifesto of 1763 stated that all newcomers to Russia were free to exercise their religion, but that they were not to propagandize their faith among the Russian Orthodox subjects. However, the first agreement between the Mennonite settlers and the Russian government was dated March 3, 1788, which was twenty-five years after Catherine's Manifesto. Neither this first agreement of 1788 nor any subsequent agreement contained a clause restricting mission work in Russia. "It is likely that very few Mennonites who settled in Russia ever heard of the restricting clause of the Manifesto of 1763."<sup>26</sup> It is of note that especially the "Mennonite Brethren did not maintain the strict separation from the non-Mennonite world as their forefathers had done. They sought fellowship with similar religious groups in Russia and abroad."<sup>27</sup> There were numerous instances where Mennonites had religious contacts with Russians; they read the Bible with them in Russian and even greeted each other with the holy kiss.<sup>28</sup> P.M. Friesen states that the Mennonites respected the faiths of other Protestant groups, that they generally refrained from propagandizing among members of other Christian groups, but that they also believed that the command of Christ to proclaim the Gospel was valid for all time.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, according to Friesen the Mennonites would not discourage any Russian who wished to join them voluntarily. It should also be noted that the Mennonites contributed to both Russian and

German missionary endeavours, but according to Friesen, they refrained from direct missionary propaganda: "Missionary activity as propaganda in the direct sense of the word is carried on by us only among non-Christian peoples."<sup>30</sup> The question of Mennonite missions in Russia thus remains ambivalent.

*Mennonites and Russian patriotism.* P.M. Friesen goes to great lengths in his attempt to counter those Slavophiles who accuse the German colonists and Mennonites of unpatriotic feelings and attitudes toward their adopted country. Especially A.A. Welizyn's charge, that the Germans have no right to be in Russia when their hearts are in Berlin,<sup>31</sup> is disproved by Friesen by quoting other Russian writers, notably P.W. Kamensky and P. Alabin, who praise the Mennonites for sacrificing their money, goods, time and themselves in an attempt to help Russian soldiers in the Crimean and Russo-Japanese wars.<sup>32</sup> Friesen comments: "... May our lives testify that we love God, His church and mankind, our Tsar, our fatherland, and our fellow citizens, with a warm, grateful and active love!"<sup>33</sup>

This love for the Russian fatherland goes back to the very beginning of the Mennonites' sojourn in Russia and was no doubt due to the friendliness, honour, and privileges which the Tsars extended to the Mennonites. Many Mennonites, especially the intellectuals among them, felt that it was not sufficient to merely be grateful to Russia, but that the Mennonites owed Russia an active patriotism. Friesen voices these feelings of patriotism when he writes:

We also believe that as subjects, citizens and Christians we will not only be able to live in Russia with an untroubled conscience, but that we will also be able to stand as a patriotic, culturally-useful, small member in the large family of Russia (into which we have been adopted by Divine Providence), and will learn to do this more and more as a total body.<sup>34</sup>

This positive Mennonite attitude toward the powers that be may have found its first extensive historical manifestation among the Mennonites in Russia. In his book, *Geschichte der Wehrlosen Taufgesinnten Gemeinden*, published in 1873, Martin Klassen expresses an attitude of awe and reverence toward the monarchs of his time, especially those of Russia.

As Walter Klaassen observes in a review of this book, "Not a single negative reference to any Prussian or Russian monarch can be found," and Russia is portrayed as the uncorrupted land in contrast to morally decaying Western Europe.<sup>35</sup>

While German patriotism was virtually non-existent among Mennonites in Prussia, Russian patriotism seems to have been widespread among Mennonite intellectuals. The Prussian-born Heinrich Heese, Sr., was an extreme Russian patriot. During the Crimean War he extolled the Tsar and concluded that Russia was no less civilized and cultured than England and France, and that Russia was the land where God would preserve his elect.<sup>36</sup> P.M. Friesen observes: "It is not the exaggerated pathos of his poetic patriotism that is interesting, but the fact that he, the born Prussian and Lutheran, and now Russian Mennonite, carried over so completely the Prussian 'Crusade-Patriotism' onto Russian soil."<sup>37</sup> Friesen adds that Heese's patriotism was quite general among the Mennonites in Russia.<sup>38</sup>

The outstanding example of Russian patriotism is Bernhard Harder, minister, teacher and poet. He calls Russia his "dear fatherland," the Tsarina is the "noblest of women" and *Landesmutter*, and those who wage war against Russia are "Satan's servants and partners."<sup>39</sup> His extreme patriotic attitude toward the Russian state and the Tsar is expressed well in the following stanza of one of his poems:

Auch wir Mennoniten stehen,  
Herrscher, in dem Beter-Chor:  
Hoffnungsvoll und dankbar sehen  
Liebend wir zu Dir empor,  
Stehend an des Thrones Stufen,  
Wo in unserm schwachen Teil  
Wir mit einer Stimme rufen:  
"Heil dir, Landesvater, Heil!"<sup>40</sup>

When toward the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries political winds of change began to blow through Russia, especially among the Russian intellectuals and students, the Mennonites were not influenced by them.

In fact, the Mennonites, belonging to the materially well-to-do classes, favoured the conservative forces which tried to maintain the status quo. According to Friesen, the Mennonites would have moved even more to the "right" had it not been for the fear of what the Russian nationalists might do to their religious, civic, and educational privileges.<sup>41</sup> Friesen continues:

If the extreme confessionalism and nationalism of the 'truly Russian people' had not been manifested in such a crass manner, at least seventy-five percent of the Mennonites—'for the sake of the Tsar' and out of fear and antipathy to democracy, socialism, and everything that smelled of revolution—would have been 'truly Russian people' in the monarchical, patriotic, and social sense.<sup>42</sup>

It may be of interest to note that while attending Russian universities, the Mennonite students were little influenced by the political movements among the Russian students.<sup>43</sup>

*Mennonites and conscription.* While the patriotism of the Mennonites was sincere and genuine, there is no doubt that the conscription issue in the 1870's tested severely the good-will that the Mennonites had toward the Russian government. As a result of the government's new conscription laws and Russification policies, Mennonite deputies travelled to St. Petersburg repeatedly in an effort to maintain the special status of the Mennonites in Russia. It seems that the Mennonites would have fared better with the officials in St. Petersburg had they been more diplomatic and had they known the Russian language better. Moreover, it seems that their pleas for continued recognition of their privileges would have been more successful had they demonstrated earlier greater willingness to learn the Russian language. In 1871 six deputies were sent to St. Petersburg in connection with the conscription issue. P.M. Friesen notes that two of these deputies knew Russian well, one knew the written language of the government's chancery only, and the two elders among the group did not know Russian at all. The Minister of Crown Lands criticized the deputies for their lack of knowledge of the Russian language:

The Minister regretted the fact that the two elders, after a seventy-year stay of the Mennonites in Russia, could not speak the Russian language and declared this a sin. Minister Epp's assurance that efforts were being made to make up for this neglect, he answered with: "Too late!"<sup>44</sup>

When in 1873 another delegation traveled to the Russian capital on behalf of the non-resistance position of the Mennonites, the deputies were surprised to find that the Grand Duke Constantine Nikolievitsch could speak German with them. Again the Mennonites were criticized, although this time not because of their ignorance of Russian. "We had been in Russia for 70 or 80 years" Friesen reports the Grand Duke as saying, "and enriched ourselves and had enjoyed protection and favor: now we were to recognize our duty to do something for the fatherland."<sup>45</sup> On another occasion Mennonite deputies were reminded that it was difficult to take them seriously with regard to their peace principle when the Ministry in St. Petersburg had a room-full of files concerning the quarrels and fights among the Mennonites and that on several occasions the government had to step in in order to settle their differences.<sup>46</sup> In a petition to the Tsar of 1874 the Mennonites agreed to do alternative service, such as medical and forestry work, and promised to learn and teach the Russian language more diligently in their schools.<sup>47</sup> It is significant to note, however, that the Mennonites preferred the forestry service to any other non-combatant involvement because the forest camps provided them with the isolation they required to cultivate their faith and to preserve their way of life. In the forest camps the Mennonites continued to speak their High and Low German languages.

When the war broke out in 1914 some Mennonites sympathized with the Russian cause while others were more inclined toward Germany and its military efforts. The majority no doubt stood somewhere in between these two attitudes, trying to maintain their independence of feeling as well as existence.<sup>48</sup> Throughout World War I the Mennonites served in alternative, non-combatant areas, with half of the men serving in the Semstvo Union, which was a

local patriotic organization formed to help and care for the wounded and sick.<sup>49</sup>

*Emigration to America.* However conciliatory the Russian government was toward the Mennonites and their concerns for special status, the general program of Russification, the questions with regard to military service, and the possible loss of Mennonite privileges, caused many Russian Mennonites to cast their eyes toward America. The eventual Mennonite exodus from Russia in the second half of the 19th century brought about a psychological split between those who felt that Russia had in a sense betrayed them and those who argued that the Mennonites had no right to desert their fatherland. In a passage entitled "The Significance of Emigration," P.M. Friesen states that those who decided to leave for America were landless and narrow-minded Mennonites who refused to accept the Russian culture, identified German with Mennonitism, did not know the Russian language well, did not appreciate the rich literature and philosophy of Russia, did not approve of young Mennonite studying in Russian institutions, and who identified Pan-Slavism with nihilism.<sup>50</sup> According to David Rempel, the landed Mennonites, the preachers, and the more progressive individuals recognized the need for educational reforms and were satisfied with the newly enacted alternative forestry service and hence they saw no need for emigration.<sup>51</sup> Those who remained in Russia even suspected the motives of the emigrants. Elder Jakob Wiebe in a letter to a fellow-elder suggests that the emigrants disdain the Russians on the one hand and lust after prosperity in America on the other. He continues:

In the beginning some religious considerations may have contributed towards this cause but that is no longer the case. At this time there is only the attraction of friendship, the (hopefully) golden mountains, curiosity and, most of all, the fear of sending their sons into service. Mostly the people leaving are those who have no understanding of non-resistance or Christianity.<sup>52</sup>

Others tried to dissuade would-be emigrants by arguing that Mennonites owed Russia a great deal for having received them nearly a hundred years ago, that they were brought to Russia to witness to the grace of God and to

fulfill the divine will, and that Russia needed their economic and cultural contributions.<sup>53</sup> America, on the other hand, was portrayed by some as a land in which the scum of society gathered.<sup>54</sup> However, despite the efforts of the Russian government and influential Mennonites to discourage the restless colonists, one third of the Mennonite population left Russia prior to the Revolution of 1917.

Aside from the wisdom that comes with hindsight, in probing the pronouncements of those who suspected the emigrants of base motives, one cannot but feel that the Mennonites who chose to remain in Russia merely paid lip-service to the Russian language, culture, and things Russian and were not all that concerned about contributing their skills, knowledge and spiritual values to Russia and its people. With the exception of a few Mennonite intellectuals like P.M. Friesen, most Mennonites who remained in Russia did so because they found it difficult to give up their comforts, prosperity, and isolated Mennonite existence. Had they been more in touch with what was really happening politically in Russia, they would have seen the handwriting on the wall and possibly left for America as well. As it was, while a few individuals accepted and appreciated the culture of Russia, the majority of the Mennonites continued to speak, preach, and even publish in German well into the 20th century.<sup>55</sup> It took the revolutionary years of 1917 and the aftermath of World War I not only to silence the German voice but also destroy the German-Mennonite world in Russia.

### Conclusion

1. The Mennonites left Prussia for Russia for religious and economic reasons. Like their Anabaptist forefathers they wandered in search of a home and religious freedom. Russia under the Tsars provided them with what they desired. When some of the Mennonites later developed an intense love for their adopted country, it was an expression of gratitude toward the Tsars and not political nationalism.

2. The majority of the Mennonites in Russia did not identify with Russians and Russian culture, and indeed had no desire for such identification. In the southern steppes they were too isolated to become one with their new

fatherland, and the cultural level of the Russian peasants was seen by the Mennonites as being below their own level. The Russian people in the Mennonite towns and villages were either used as workers in Mennonite factories and farms, or else they were regarded as souls to be saved.

3. To preserve their way of life the Mennonites cultivated the High German language and the Low German dialect. The German language was not sacred to them just because it was German; it was a means to an end, the end being the preservation of the Mennonite identity. When the Russian government's attempts at russification became intense, the Mennonites tended to dig in their heels and maintain German at all costs, for they believed that with the loss of German they would also lose their separateness and their island position within a Russian sea. When in the second half of the 19th century the Mennonites began to teach and learn Russian in the schools, they did so because they had no other choice and at the same time hoped to use the language issue as a lever to move the government in favour of their special status position. For most Mennonites the Russian culture and language remained foreign. As late as the beginning of the 20th century people like P.M. Friesen had to plead with their fellow-Mennonites for greater effort in learning the Russian language.<sup>56</sup> It is well known that up to World War I the minutes of conferences were still recorded in German and that only those documents were written in Russian which dealt with government matters.<sup>57</sup>

4. While the Mennonites of Russia spoke German and thought of themselves as German people, there is no evidence to suggest that they were ever German patriots or excessively nationalistic in their feeling for Germany. As Josef Ponten comments in his novel *Im Wolgaland* which touches the Mennonites briefly: "The Mennonite had no conception of Germany; he did not even so much as refer to it. What was Germany for these people from the Volga was heaven for this man from the steppes."<sup>58</sup> Mennonites studied in Germany and Switzerland and they also travelled occasionally in Germany, but sociologically and culturally they remained aliens in the country in which their forefathers had been oppressed and persecuted.

5. While Germany remained for the Russian Mennonites a foreign land, German as a language, especially the Low-German dialect, had become for the Mennonites their *Muttersprache*. The German language thus not only helped the Mennonites to preserve their faith and their way of life, but German was also the language of their soul. To quote Ponten again: "Language is soul; for that reason a mother tongue is retained for such a long time. It is not so much the different character that makes foreign lands seem strange as it is the different language."<sup>59</sup> It seems that it is only with the gradual loss of its language that an ethnic group or a people begins to identify with another society and culture. Gerhard Reimer observes in a recent statistical study about German as mother tongue among Indiana Mennonites: "The rapid decline of German between the present college generation and their parents. . . coincides closely with the rapid acculturation that has taken place among Indiana Mennonites since World War II."<sup>60</sup>

6. Prior to World War I there were signs of an increasing willingness among the Mennonite intellectuals to adopt the Russian language and culture without necessarily giving up their Mennonite faith and distinctives. One can only speculate on what would have happened to the Mennonite identity and what form it would have taken, had the russification process been allowed to take its gradual course in the Mennonite communities. While we do not know how the Mennonites of Russia would have eventually developed had their communities not been destroyed by the events of 1917, we do know from the experiences of those Mennonites who settled in United States and Canada that the gradual loss of German and the acceptance of the English language and the American way of life does not necessarily destroy the faith and identity of the Mennonite people. It may also be added that throughout history and throughout the world there existed and still exist many Mennonites who never spoke German!

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Winnipeg, 1978), p. xxxii.
- 2 It is an ironic twist of history that the first Mennonites in Russia had a meager knowledge of High German and that they had to learn High German in Russia so as to be able to communicate with Russian government officials. David G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia. A Sketch of its Founding and Endurance, 1789-1919," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 47 (Oct. 1973), No. 4, p. 262.
- 3 *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*. A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement, 4 vols. (Scottsdale, Pa., 1955), II, 9.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 495.
- 5 Cornelius Krahn, "Mennonite Plattdeutsch," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 33 (July 1959), No. 3, pp. 256-259.
- 6 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920. The History of a Separate People* (Toronto, 1974), p. 176.
- 7 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 58.
- 8 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 47, p. 280.
- 9 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 50-51.
- 10 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 47, p. 295. During World War I there were in Russia approximately 2,000,000 German-speaking people, of whom 100 to 120 thousand were Mennonites (5%). *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, IV, 384.
- 11 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 47, p. 295.
- 12 E.K. Francis, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia 1789-1914. A Sociological Interpretation," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 25 (July 1951), No. 3, p. 174.

- 13 J.W. Dyck, *The Problems of the Russo-Germans in the later Works of Josef Ponten* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 1956), pp. 123-124.
- 14 Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, p. 178.
- 15 Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church in the Russian Mennonite Environment, 1789-1870," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 25 (Jan. 1951), No. 1, p. 22.
- 16 Dyck, *The Problems of the Russo-Germans*, p. 123.
- 17 The following names were popular among the Mennonites: Anuta, Petia, Kolia, Katia. Gerhard Wiens, "Russian in Low German," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 13 (April, 1958), No. 2, p. 77.
- 18 C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites*; third edition, revised and enlarged by Cornelius Krahn (Newton, Kansas, 1950), p. 415.
- 19 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 96-97.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 711-712.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 757.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 604.
- 23 N.J. Klassen, "Mennonite Intelligentsia in Russia," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 24 (April, 1969), No. 2, p. 54.
- 24 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol 48 (Jan. 1974), No. 1, p. 43.
- 25 Walter Quiring, "Cultural Interaction Among the Mennonites in Russia," *Mennonite Life*, Vol 24 (April, 1969), No. 2, p. 63.
- 26 *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, IV, 385.
- 27 Kreider, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church," p. 30.
- 28 Aaron A. Toews, *Mennonitische Martyrer der juengsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart*, 2 vols. (Winnipeg, 1949), I, 58.
- 29 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 630.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 636. In view of such and similar statements concerning religious propaganda it is difficult to believe that the Mennonites were ignorant of the Manifesto of 1763. Concerning alleged religious propaganda by Mennonite Brethren, see pp. 645-650.

- 31 "Was sitzen sie hier, wenn ihr Herz in Berlin ist. . .?"  
*Ibid.*, p. 575.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 575-586.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 586.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 652-653.
- 35 Walter Klaassen, "A Belated Review: Martin Klaassen's 'Geschichte der Wehrlosen Taufgesinnten Gemeinden' Published in 1873," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 49 (Jan. 1975), No. 1, pp. 43-52.
- 36 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 702-703.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 704-705.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 705.
- 39 Victor Fast, "The Theology of Bernhard Harder," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 37 (Jan. 1963), No. 1, p. 50.
- 40 *Ibid.* Concerning B. Harder's patriotism Friesen writes: "We could relate many more commendable things about him—his glowing patriotism for Russia, especially in the form of his love for the Tsar. . . ." *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 958.
- 41 *Ibid.*, P. 627.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 627-628.
- 43 N.J. Klassen, "Mennonite Intelligentsia in Russia," p. 54.
- 44 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 587. See also the somewhat embarrassing and comical misunderstanding between the Mennonite deputies and the representatives of the Russian government on this occasion. *Ibid.*, pp. 587-589.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 588-589. In 1873 Theodor Hans, minister of the Evangelical Herrnhut Brethren Church in St. Petersburg, advised the Mennonites on how they ought to approach government officials more diplomatically. The petitions and documents should be written in Russian and the deputies chosen should know the Russian language well so as to be able to converse with the Grand Duke. *Ibid.*, pp. 601-602.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 1026-1027.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 595.
- 48 Cornelius Krahn, "Some Social Attitudes of the Men-

- nonites of Russia," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 9 (October, 1935), No. 4, p. 175.
- 49 Frank C. Peters, "Non-Combatant Service Then and Now," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 10 (Jan. 1935), No. 1, pp. 31-35.
- 50 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 592-593.
- 51 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 48, p. 41. See also Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, pp. 498-499.
- 52 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 607-608.
- 53 See Leonard Gross, Ivan Friesen, with the collaboration of "Zur Einwanderung russlaendischer Mennoniten nach Nordamerika vor 100 Jahren," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblaetter*, 31. Jahrgang (1974), Neue Folge Nr. 26, pp. 107-113.
- 54 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 606.
- 55 John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Pilgrims and Pioneers*, edited by A.J. Klassen (Fresno, California, 1975), p. 97.
- 56 "Ein Drittel des Unterrichtes in deutsch. Spr. (Rel. u. Deutsch) bei deutschem Gottesdienst und Familiensprache ist genuegend fuer das Deutsch der Mennoniten: die russ. Sprache bedarf einer viel groesseren Kraft und Vorarbeit als die deutsche, weil letztere die heimische Praxis fuer sich hat, welcher die russische bei mehr als 9/10 der Schueler entbehrt. — Ohne engen Connex mit der hoeheren Sprache wenigstens bei unserer mennonitischen 'Intelligenz', den Lehrern etc., sind wir in Russland nicht 'Buerger', sondern halibunmuendige Beisassen!" Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, pp. 608-609.
- 57 *Ibid.*, pp. 526-527.
- 58 Quoted in J.W. Dyck, "The Mennonites in Josef Ponten's Novels," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 12 (July, 1957), No. 3, p. 137 (Translated).
- 59 Quoted in Dyck, *The Problems of the Russo-Germans*, p. 78 (Translated).
- 60 Gerhard Reimer, "German as Mother Tongue Among Indiana Mennonites," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 49 (July, 1977), No. 3, p. 246.