

Update on Russian Archival Collection Efforts

The Center for Mennonite Studies in Fresno has entered into an agreement with the State Regional Archives in Odessa to microfilm the records of Board of Guardians that deal with the Mennonite story in South Russia. The Board of Guardians was the official agency of the Czarist government responsible for the oversight of all of the Colonists that settled in South Russia. Between 1800, when the Board of Guardians was established, and 1871, when it was disbanded Mennonites were among those groups under its administrative purview. In 1871 the functions of the Board were disbursed to various other Russian governmental agencies.

Since 1995 the Center has had an ongoing and good working relationship with this archives in Odessa. Alan Peters, Jay Hubert, Jeff Wall and Paul Toews have all visited this archives. Toews has repeatedly met with Vladimir Malchenko, Director of the Odessa archives and with Lilia Belousova, Head of Records Information and Foreign Relations Department. We have been microfilming records from some of their small collections. The quality of their work and the ease of working together has given us the confidence to now enter into an agreement for a large microfilming project. The Board of Guardians collection contains over 15,000 files. The amount of material in any given file varies from a single page to hundreds of pages.

Our first step toward acquiring copies of these materials has been to have the Archives prepare a detailed inventory of those files that contain significant Mennonite material. We now have a detailed inventory for the period from 1847-1852. That inventory details roughly 13,000 pages of documents dealing with Mennonites. Included are records regarding immigration, land purchase and transfer, civil and criminal court records, voting records, educational records, agricultural records, census data and many other kinds of material. These records are invaluable for helping us to gain an understanding of the Mennonite experience in South Russia. Some of the records are in the German language and others in Russian. The detailed inventory also includes a name and geographic index, so these materials will be very easy to use.

We are cooperating with the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies (Hillsboro, Kan.) and the British Columbia Mennonite Historical Society to jointly fund this initial project of 13, 000 pages. This is the first of what we hope will be a series of microfilming projects in these Board of Guardian Records. We are working with the Odessa archives to secure inventories for the files for 1800-1846 and 1853-1870. Once we have those inventories we hope to also microfilm those documents.

Microfilming in Ukraine is expensive. The standard rate there is \$1.00 per page. Thus we are currently

involved in a \$13,000 project. We are grateful to the donors that have made this possible. We have a special designated fund for Russian archival acquisition. We need the assistance of many donors to be able to continue microfilming these important records.

Ukraine is today an unsettled society. The economic and social conditions are deteriorating. The return to a more authoritarian political system is possible. This is the moment to retrieve these important records that will shed so much new light on the story of our people during their 150-year sojourn in Russia and Ukraine. Any and all assistance to make this happen will not only help us to understand our past but make these resources available for generations to come.