

A HISTORY OF THE FAST FAMILY

BY

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Preface

In this paper I have attempted to trace back my heritage as far as possible and examine situations tying into our Mennonite Heritage.

Because of the considerable time that can be spent tracing the various branches of the genealogy, I have specifically concentrated on my direct heritage.

This paper is but a glimpse into our family's past. Any additional information or correction of errors would be appreciated. They can be submitted to:

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I would like to thank the many relatives who have assisted me in preparation of this paper. Your help was appreciated and provoked in me a genuine interest and pride in my Mennonite background.

Arnold Fast

Arnold Fast
March, 1984

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A HISTORY OF THE FAST FAMILY

Introduction

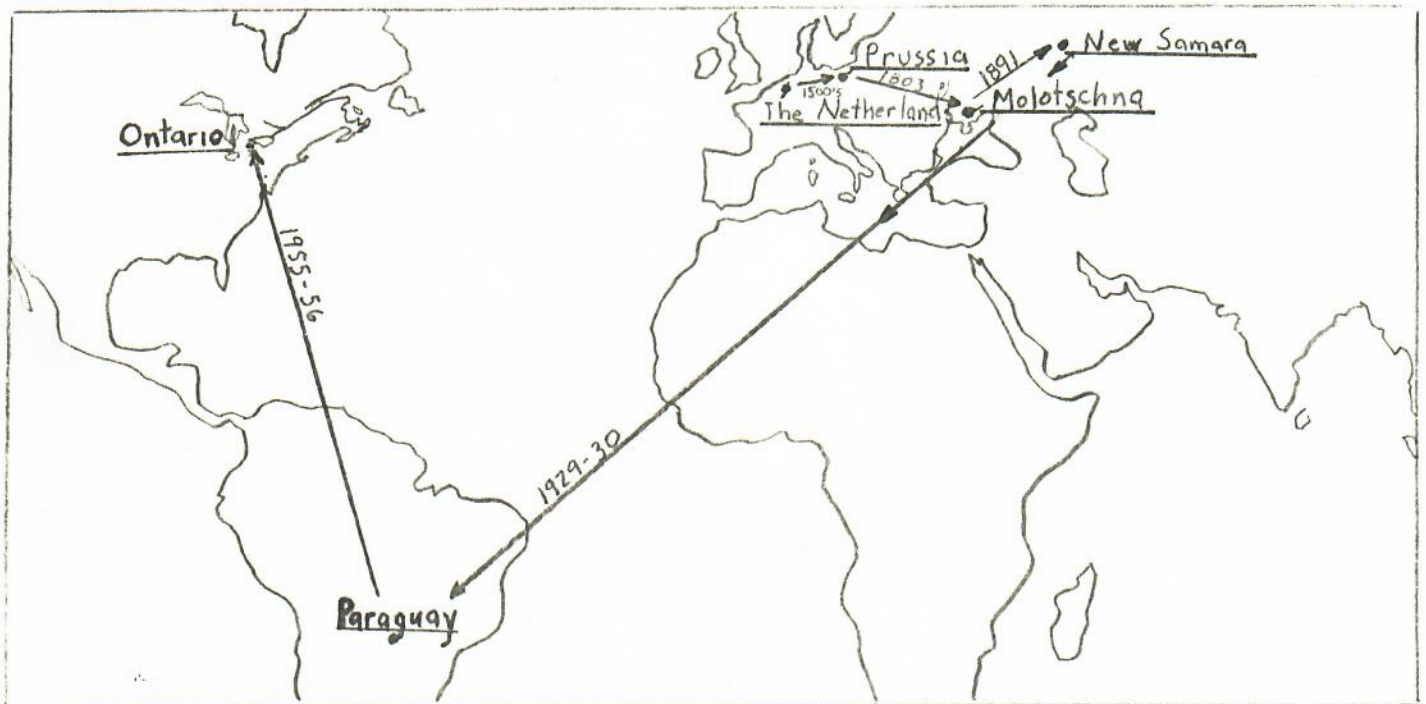
In tracing one's family history, most families can usually identify themselves with a particular nationality and thereby conclude that their family is, by descent, either Scottish or German etc. However after researching the Fast family history, it is clear that the family would have a difficult time calling any nationality their own or even taking any geographical area and naming it their "Fatherland." Over the past 450 years the ancestors of the Fast family have moved from Belgium to the Netherlands to Prussia (Poland) to the Ukraine to Russia proper to Paraguay and now most live in Canada. The Fast story parallels the story of a peculiar religious denomination which was later to become known as the Mennonite church. The story is one of strong convictions and faithfulness, which led to years of persecution and also perserverance. It is not a flawless story, but it is one of direction, full of lessons for the present generation and for those yet to come. Every healthy plant must have roots, and so as a family, the Fast's have a rich heritage from which they too can draw from. A poem written by O. Kroepklin gives expression to this idea:

Eternity past and eternity to come
Impinge on your life,
The ancestors gave you
Your existance and striving,
The descendants carry on
Your aspirations and yearnings.

Between the two you ought
To preserve and enhance
What you have inherited,
As a valuable link
In the unending chain.¹

Although the family has not kept good ancestral records, the earliest direct ancestor that has been positively identified is Aron Fast (A1), who was born most likely in the 1820's and is known to have died sometime before 1900. He seems to have lived all of his life in the Russian-Mennonite colony known as the Molotschna. Although the information now available does not allow one to trace the exact line back any further, one can fairly accurately assume the history of the forefathers of Aron Fast perhaps as far back as the 1530's.

Map 1- Migrations of the Fast Family



Background to the Name Fast

The Mennonite Encyclopedia records that the Danzig-Prussia area is the first reliable record of the family name Fast. The name Fast (Feste, Faast or Vast) is a Mennonite family name which was found primarily among the rural Flemish Mennonite families living in West Prussia in the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries. The name was first mentioned in 1582 at Wotzlaff (see Map 2, p.6) where Arendt Feste appears in the record. The actual ~~name~~ appearance of the name Fast in a church record was in Danzig in 1669. According to records, there were nine families bearing the name in 1727 and all had Dutch given names.²

The Origins of the Mennonites

Who are the Mennonites and what is their history? The answers to these two questions are essential to the understanding of the history of the East family. The family has its roots in this movement and their convictions have shaped the family history since about the 1530's.

Mennonites, first known as Anabaptists, emerged in history about 450 years ago, and were as Pope John XXIII called them, the "most separated brethren" of the Protestant Reformation.³ Anabaptism was though neither Catholic nor Protestant. It was a Christian movement of the most radical sort in that it questioned virtually all the assumptions upon which sixteenth century society, culture and church rested.⁴ The unified European -Catholic world of church, state and society had developed over the centuries with the conviction that it represented an unfolding of the Kingdom of God. Martin Luther became a leader of a religious-political revolution which challenged the church of Rome and the authority of the Pope. Also in the 1520's, Switzerland was experiencing reform under the leadership of Ulrich Zwingli, who like Luther attempted a religious and political reform in co-operation with the civil authorities. As time passed, some of Zwingli's more radical followers had difficulty accepting his approach to church reform. They agreed with Zwingli on the abolition of the Mass, but they challenged Zwingli on whether or not citizenship should automatically mean church membership as well. A small group of dissenters met secretly for Bible study and concluded from their understanding of the New Testament that a true reformation could not come from the entire society, but from a dedicated core-group of true believers who actually lived out their faith. They came to agree that true believers were people who at a mature age voluntarily became followers of Christ, not those who were infants and without conscious decision were baptized into the church. On January 21, 1525 three radical reformers re-baptized each other and thus began the movement.

Political and religious leaders saw this movement as a non-recognition of civil and church authority in matters of conscience and faith. They saw the invalidation of infant baptism as an undermining of the whole society. It must be remembered that infant baptism was not only

the door into the church but also into the state. Church and civil leaders faced a fundamental threat to the social system by which they controlled and "saved" the masses. Thus in 1529 an imperial diet outlawed Anabaptism throughout the Holy Roman Empire. However the movement could not be easily stamped out. Anabaptism advanced rapidly throughout the Germanic lands. In the northern areas of Flanders and the Netherlands the Reformation slowly took on an Anabaptist character after the appearance of a preacher named Melchior Hoffman around 1530. It is in Flanders where the forebearers of the name Fast are alleged to have come from.

The fundamentals of the Anabaptist faith were first outlined at Schleitheim (Switzerland) in 1527. They agreed on believers baptism, a life of discipleship, non-resistance, and a separation of themselves from the world. Most Anabaptists pledged themselves to be faithful to their understanding of the Christian faith even in the face of death and persecution. Eventually organizational and theological unity was achieved in one wing of the Anabaptist movement by Menno Simons (1496-1561), whose followers later became known as "Menists" or Mennonites. The followers of Menno were totally peaceful, shunning the sword even in self-defence. They were generally obedient to their overlords, holding back only when an oath or other act of ultimate authority was required. Since Menno's realm of influence encompassed northern Germany and the Netherlands, it is most probable that the Fast family forefathers came under his direct influence.

The consequences of the unique and undermining religious beliefs of the Mennonites was a sustained and bloody persecution. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V proceeded to crush the Anabaptist movement in Flanders with the aid of the Catholic Inquisition. Those that were not martyred either recanted of their beliefs or they fled, usually north to the Netherlands. Presumably Fast family forefathers fled north. But the Netherlands provided little safety, for here too bitter persecution of sword and fire continued.

The Prussian Period

The bitter persecution of Anabaptists in northern Europe from 1531 to 1597 caused a continuous flow of Anabaptist refugees from the lowlands to greater areas of safety. It can be safely assumed

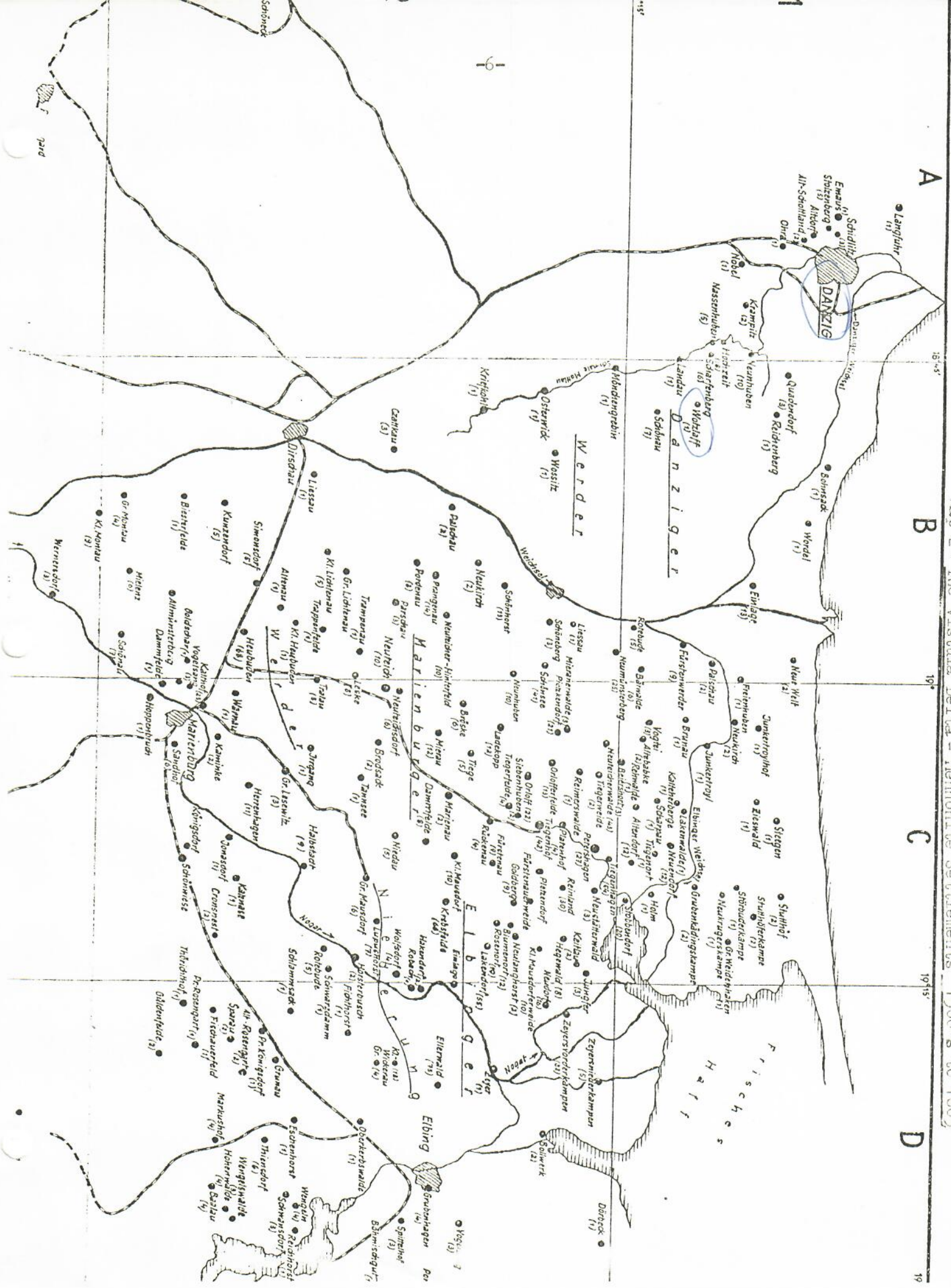
that during this time the forefathers of Aron Fast fled with other Mennonites out of the Netherlands east-ward to the outer fringes of the Holy Roman Empire, via the North and Baltic Seas to the Vistula Delta region. It is there in modern day Poland where the Fast forefathers lived for about 250 years.

Even in the Vistula Delta area the Anabaptists were not very welcome. Already in 1534 the Danzig city council wrote to the cities of Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Emden requesting that no Anabaptists be permitted to board ships to Danzig. However it was not long before the competing Catholic, Luthern and Reformed landlords discovered that the value of the Anabaptists' virtues far exceeded the dangers of their so-called heresies. Mennonites won recognition as industrious workers who converted swamps into pastures or grain fields. In 1547 Danzig banker Loyson offered Mennonites land and escape from persecution if they would drain and settle his swamp land near Tiegenhof. This offer finally provided the Anabaptist refugees a home where they could settle down in relative peace. Here the Mennonite population grew so rapidly that by 1608 the Luthern Bishop was complaining that the whole delta was overrun by Mennonites. By 1640 the swamps were well drained and the Mennonite settlements were well established. As already mentioned the name Arendt Feste appears in 1528 at Wotzloff (see Map 2, p. 6) and the actual name Fast appears in 1669 in records at Danzig.

The Mennonites never enjoyed equal civil or religious privileges with those of the state churches. At first the Mennonites were merely tolerated, just given the right to worship. Anything that might promote the growth of Mennonitism beyond their immediate circle was strictly forbidden. There could be no proselytizing. Worship had to be carried on quietly, without attracting public notice, and in private homes only. Meetinghouses were not allowed until the close of the sixteenth century. In the course of time it grew more difficult for the Mennonites as they grew more prosperous and therefore aroused the envy of their less energetic neighbours.

The large self-sufficient settlements in the Vistula Delta made it easy for our forefathers to maintain their distinctive doctrines and perpetuate their distinctive doctrines and customs. Because the Mennonites held strongly to the beliefs of their forefathers, they

Map 2 - The Vistula Delta - Mennonite Settlements 1500's to 1803



A

B

C

D

inevitably ran into difficulty because of their peace stand. The first appearance of the problem of non-resistance was in 1613 when Prussia was threatened by the Swedes. The Mennonites were then given military exemption in exchange for a money payment. Until 1642, the Mennonites suffered because of the increasingly large payments of money demanded by the government. But in 1642, King Sladislaus IV granted Mennonites a privilegium promising toleration and protection. The privilegium was the result of the honour bestowed on the Mennonites for draining the swamps.

The eighteenth century brought an even greater toleration of Mennonites in Prussia. Many new churches were built and the language used in the worship services gradually shifted from Dutch to German. The Low German of West Prussia became the colloquial tongue of the Mennonites and has remained so through most of this very century. It was in 1727 that we have records of nine families bearing the name East. The name was first represented in congregations such as Iadekopp, Fuerstenwerder, Elbing and Danzig.

Mennonites Under Fredrick the Great

The reign of Fredrick the Great from 1740 to 1786 was a turning point in the history of West Prussian Mennonites. During this period the different regions in which Mennonites lived were united under one political rule. Fredrick was glad to promise complete religious toleration, but military exemption had become another matter. Increasing warfare and growing armies made forcible enlistment more necessary. In 1780 Fredrick finally guaranteed Mennonites complete religious freedom including military exemption (an integral element of their religion), on the condition, however, that they pay an annual sum to support the military academy at Culm.

In the meantime legislation was passed which made it very difficult for Mennonites to increase their land holdings. The Mennonites had already acquired much land, but it was becoming increasingly inadequate to satisfy the steadily increasing Mennonite population. In 1789 Fredrick's successor made the law even more stringent making it virtually impossible for further Mennonite acquisition of land. It then became evident that the larger church and state were determined to stop the further growth of Mennonites. Fearful for the future, the Mennonites began to look for a new asylum where they could again

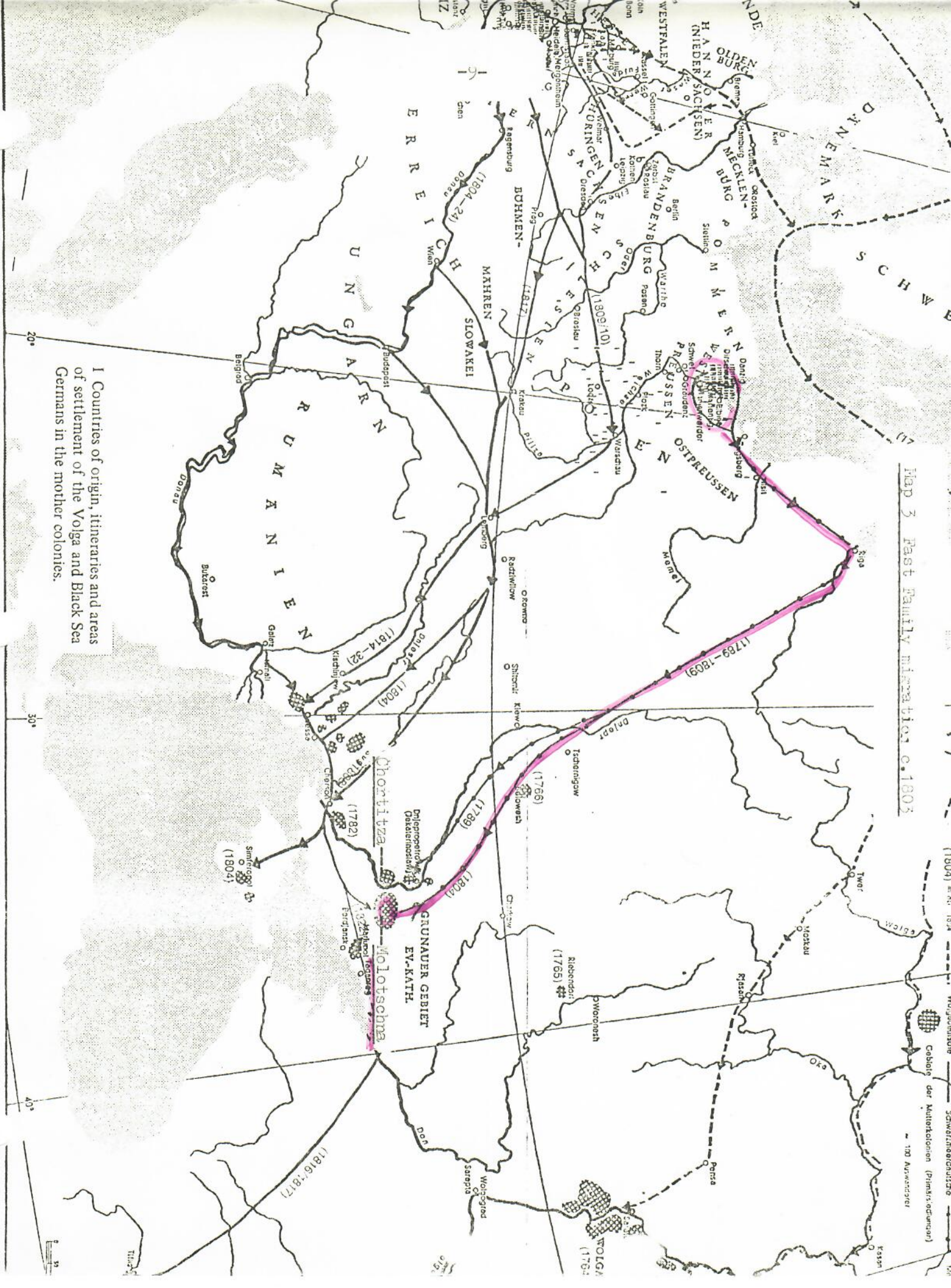
be free to exercise their convictions without the fear of government restraint.

From Prussia to Russia

Just as difficulties for Mennonites began to mount in Prussia, Russia was quickly expanding her territory in the southern Ukraine. Realizing that agriculture was the backbone of national prosperity, the Russian Czarina Catherine was very much interested in settling these unoccupied agricultural lands near the Black and Caspian Seas. Catherine advertised the advantages of her crown lands throughout Europe to people whose religious freedoms were being infringed upon, and also to those who were dissatisfied with their political or economic status. Besides offering free land, transportation and support, she also offered military exemption, religious toleration and liberty in establishing such educational and local political institutions as best suited their needs. In 1786 George Trappe, Catherine's representative, found a very interested audience in the worried Mennonites of Danzig and West Prussia. Though response was rather cautious, by 1788 228 poorer working class Prussian Mennonite families were in Russia. This was the beginning of a movement that would see more than 7000 Mennonites leave Danzig-West Prussia to the southern Ukraine by the mid nineteenth century.

The early migrations into Russia occurred in two major movements. The first wave beginning in 1788 lasted about 10 years. These Mennonites settled mainly at Chortitza, east of the Dnieper River (see Map 3, p. 9). These pioneers suffered many hardships during the early years. Partly because of bad reports (locust plague & crop failure) from Chortitza Mennonites, and partly because the Russian government could no longer extend aid to new settlers, immigration almost stopped by the end of the century. However in 1801 the Prussian government tightened up the Mennonite Edict⁵, which caused a second wave of immigration beginning in 1803. These settlers received a tract of land of about 300,000 acres on a fertile, treeless plain south-east of the Chortitza settlement. The land was situated in the province of Taurida along the Molotschna River, a small stream running parallel to the Dnieper and flowing into the sea of Azov. It is quite likely that in

Map 3 Past Family Migration c.1803



I Countries of origin, itineraries and areas of settlement of the Volga and Black Sea Germans in the mother colonies.

this migration came the father and grandfather of Aron East (Al). Most of these colonists were from the region of Marienburg and Elbing, and were rather well to do farmers. After paying the ten percent emigration tax, the majority of the farmers still had enough capital left which they could use to stock up their new farms. Emigrants covered a distance of 2000 kilometres, plodding for months through the mud in their horse-drawn covered wagons, and taking with them their farm implements, cattle and even their sheep.

The Molotschna

The first Molotschna group arrived in 1804. They wintered with their fellow Mennonites in Chortitza and learnt many lessons ~~from~~ from them, making their own settlement less difficult. The newly arrived settlers built eighteen villages along the Molotschna, the Tomak and the Kuruschan Rivers. In Prussia most of the settlers had lived on individual farms, but in the Ukraine they decided to establish villages in order to protect themselves against marauders. Many of the new villages received familiar Prussian place names. These Molotschna colonists were admitted to Russia on exactly the same terms and were granted the same privileges as those which had been extended to the Chortitza Mennonites.

Each family was entitled to 175 acres of land. At first it was thought that sheep raising would be the principal source of income and thus a fair amount of land would be required. These Prussian farmers found considerable difficulty in adapting their farming methods to the challenges of their new environment. It took years of experimentation before they discovered how to combat drought, grasshoppers and the occasional crop failures. In the 1830's a seaport was opened at Berdyansk on the Black Sea. As a result, new markets were opened and wheat growing soon began to replace sheep raising in the Molotschna as the main source of income. And as the colony became more established, the settlers had turned the treeless plains into flourishing fields & orchards, and the pastures were covered with wide expanses of wheat and filled with fine herds of cattle and flocks of sheep.

The Mennonites tended to have very large families, and this led to a very rapid increase in population and therefore an increasing

need for more land. Most Mennonite men gave little thought to any occupation other than farming. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that government regulations stipulated that the original 175 acre plots of land for each family were not to be subdivided. Plots had to be kept intact and taken over by one member of the family only. As a result the Molotschna Colony expanded eastward establishing new villages as they were required.

Aron Fast: Hierschau

In 1848 the village of Hierschau was established in the Molotschna Colony. One of these original settlers was a man named Aron Fast (A1) who came that summer with his new bride Anna(?).⁶ This is the earliest identifiable forefather which can be positively determined. Having checked the emigration lists of Mennonites coming from Prussia to Russia (Stump and Unruh), it is not possible to determine which Fast's were Aron's father or grandfather. Very little is known about the life of Aron Fast. He was probably born in the 1820's to an original settler in the Molotschna. Seeing that his first child was born in Hierschau in 1848, one can assume that he had been married in 1847/8. Land was undoubtedly quite expensive and rare in the old villages, and as a result Aron and his wife decided to start their married life in the newly opened village of Hierschau.

Hierschau was on the south bank of the Begin-Tchokrak River (see Map 4, p. 12). It consisted of 5,216 acres of land which was divided up into 30 farms (Hoefe) of 175 acres. Hierschau was originally planned as a model village. It was developed under the rigid control of the Ohrloff Agricultural Association and given direction by Johann Cornies. The houses were very regularly spaced and they were all constructed of burned-tile. Hedges separated the properties, fruit trees surrounded the homes, and the fields were mostly used for wheat growing.

Aron(A1) and Anna(?) had four children: Johann(B1), Peter(B2), Gerhard(B3), and Maria(B4).⁶ Johann married Aganetha Kunkel (see App 3) and later moved to the Molotschna village of Franzenthal where Johann died suddenly at the age of forty-one. Gerhard and Peter both married and moved to a new Mennonite colony opened in the north-east called New Samara. Aron's daughter Maria married a Kornelius Goerzen and they

continued to live in Hierschau. Little else is known about Aron Fast, although it is clear that he died rather young (date unknown). His wife Anna(?) is known to have remarried an Isaak Baerg. A letter written to the editor of the Memnonitische Rundschau (January 30, 1901- see App. IV) contains an interesting story of how she and her second husband lived out their retirement years in Hierschau.

Social Separateness

It soon became very clear that the Mennonites were not going to melt into the Russian cultural pot. There were a number of reasons which contributed to their distinct social system with its own unique cultural characteristics. As a result of persecutions in the Netherlands and oppression in Prussia, the Mennonites had learned to withdraw from society. Their religion ideally called for a pure community apart from the wicked world. On top of this the Russian Czars encouraged separateness, hoping that Mennonite communities might become models for the rest of Russia. The inferior culture of the peasants around them and the laws prohibiting Mennonites from preaching to Russians made the separation even more natural.⁷

Education

Education had always been essential to Mennonites. In order to develop into mature Christians, the Mennonites knew that scripture reading was essential. Therefore it was very important that every child was taught how to read and write. Every village had a school building, usually situated in the centre of the village. It was obligatory that every child between the ages of seven and fourteen went to school. The schools put a heavy emphasis on teaching Bible and religion. Other courses were German, history, geography, math and also singing. Beginning in 1866 Russian officials began to exert pressure to have the Russian languages taught in the schools. The pressure had little effect until 1881, after which the Czar embarked on an intensive russification policy. By the mid 1890's all subjects except for religion and German had to be taught in the Russian language. High German was still used for church sermons though, and Low German continued to be used in all informal conversations, Bible

studies and church and community meetings.

Alternative Service

Over the years in Russia there grew an increasing animosity among the Russian peasants towards the German speaking colonists. On the one hand there was jealousy over the accomplishments of the Mennonites, and on the other hand, many of the Mennonites looked down upon the Russians as ragged, ignorant peasants. The Russian peasantry was also critical of the military service exemption granted especially to the colonists. The Mennonites insisted on special guarantees freeing them from military duty. During the 1870's universal military service was attempted to be enforced upon the Mennonites, but their religious convictions were so strongly against the ideas of war and violence that at one point all the Mennonite colonists were ready to get up and leave (one-third of the Mennonite population actually did leave in the 1870's as a result). Because of this threat the Czar made some concessions in 1874 which provided the Mennonites with non-combatant service. In 1880 the forestry service was offered to Mennonite young men instead of actual army duty. This work consisted of planting and cultivating forests in the steppes of South Russia. The term of service for the men was to be four years each. Also the entire expense of the enterprise was to be undertaken by the Mennonites themselves. It is quite likely that the sons of Aron Fast(A1), namely Johann(B1), Peter(B2), and Gerhard(B3) served under this program.

Gerhard Aron Fast(B3)

Aron's third son Gerhard was born in Hierschau on April 7, 1862. In his later youth he became a baptized member of the church. In November 1885 he married Justina Riediger (born May 29, 1859). They lived the first part of their married lives in the village of Hierschau. Here they had three children born to them: Agnita(C1- 1886), Maria(C2- 1888), and Gerhard Jr. (C3- 1890). Each farm in Hierschau had an additional acre of land which was to be used as a building site for a half-farm, which ~~were~~ could later be used by sons of the farmers who did not inherit the family farm. It is quite likely that Gerhard and his family lived on one of these half-farms. Fortunately, or as a result Gerhard was/became a good carpenter. Although farming was his first love, on the side he would construct and sell household furniture

and various other wood-products to others in the villiage.

The little land Gerhard could work plus his carpentry on the side was simply not adequate enough for him to provide properly for his family. There were many other young families in the Molotschna who had the same problem. Already by 1870 it was estimated that at least two-thirds of all heads of families were basically without land. They were spoken of as Anwohner (landless). The issue came to a head already in the 1860's when it was finally decided that the colony would sell all common land, and the income was to be used to set up new daughter colonies for the benefit of the landless. By the 1870's several new settlements were established with the aid of ^{the} mother colony.

New Samara

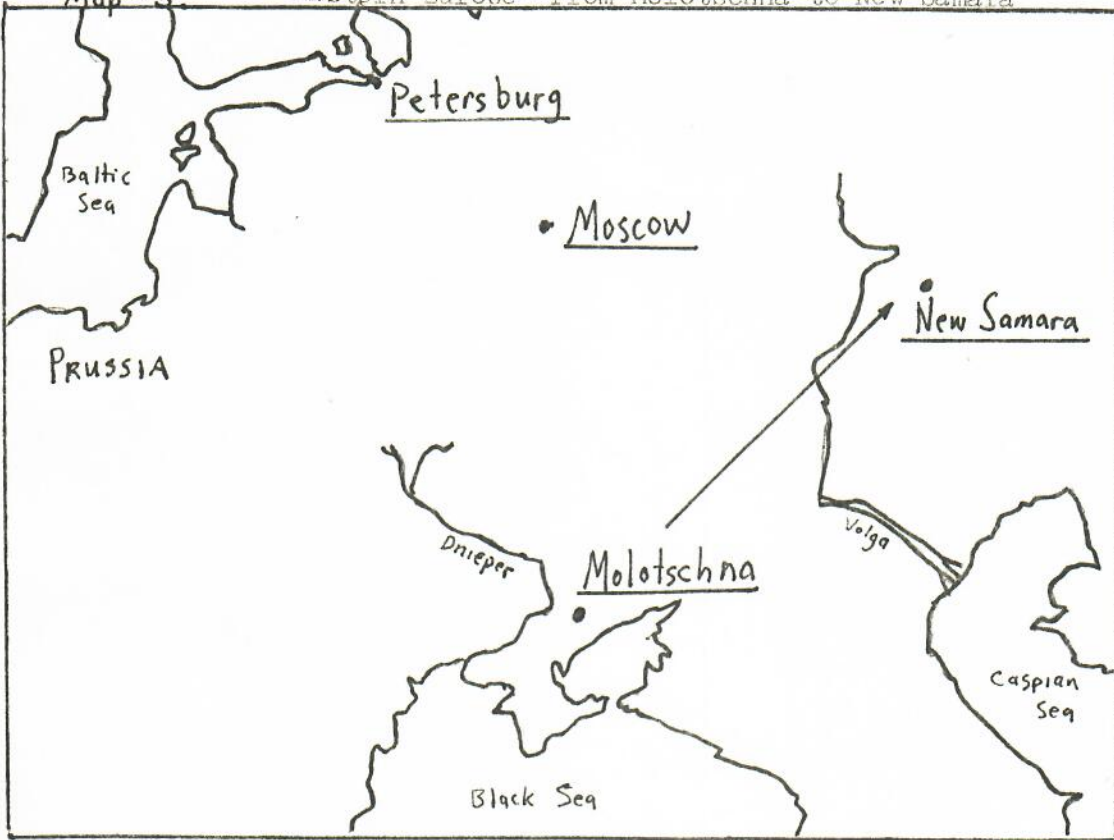
As part of the Molotschna settlement policy, in 1890 the colony bought a large tract of land on the Tock River, east of the Volga River. The settlement was called New(Neu) Samara, and it was the northern most settlement the Molotschna colony had yet bought. To many in the mother colony, especially the relatives of those living in New Samara, the new settlement seemed to be as far away as Siberia. In 1890 the settlement was measured and laid out. The mother colony offered this land to their landless people at ten years free of payment. After that time the new settlers would be required to buy back the land from the mother colony at a pre-arranged price per acre.

The offer of land was attractive to Gerhard and his brother Peter, for they simply did not have enough money to buy the expensive land in the Molotschna. A first group left for New Samara in 1890, but Gerhard(B3), Peter(B2) and their families did not leave until March of 1891. They took a long train ride, travelling approximately 1800 kilometres in a freight car to Sorotschinkja. From there they had to go another 100 kilometres with horses to get to their new land. Gerhard brought with him only the very basic necessities, including a door, a window a few necessary farm implements, etc. They had only 39 Rubels left over from the trip, which was just enough to buy a cow, which they bought from local "Easchkieren" natives.

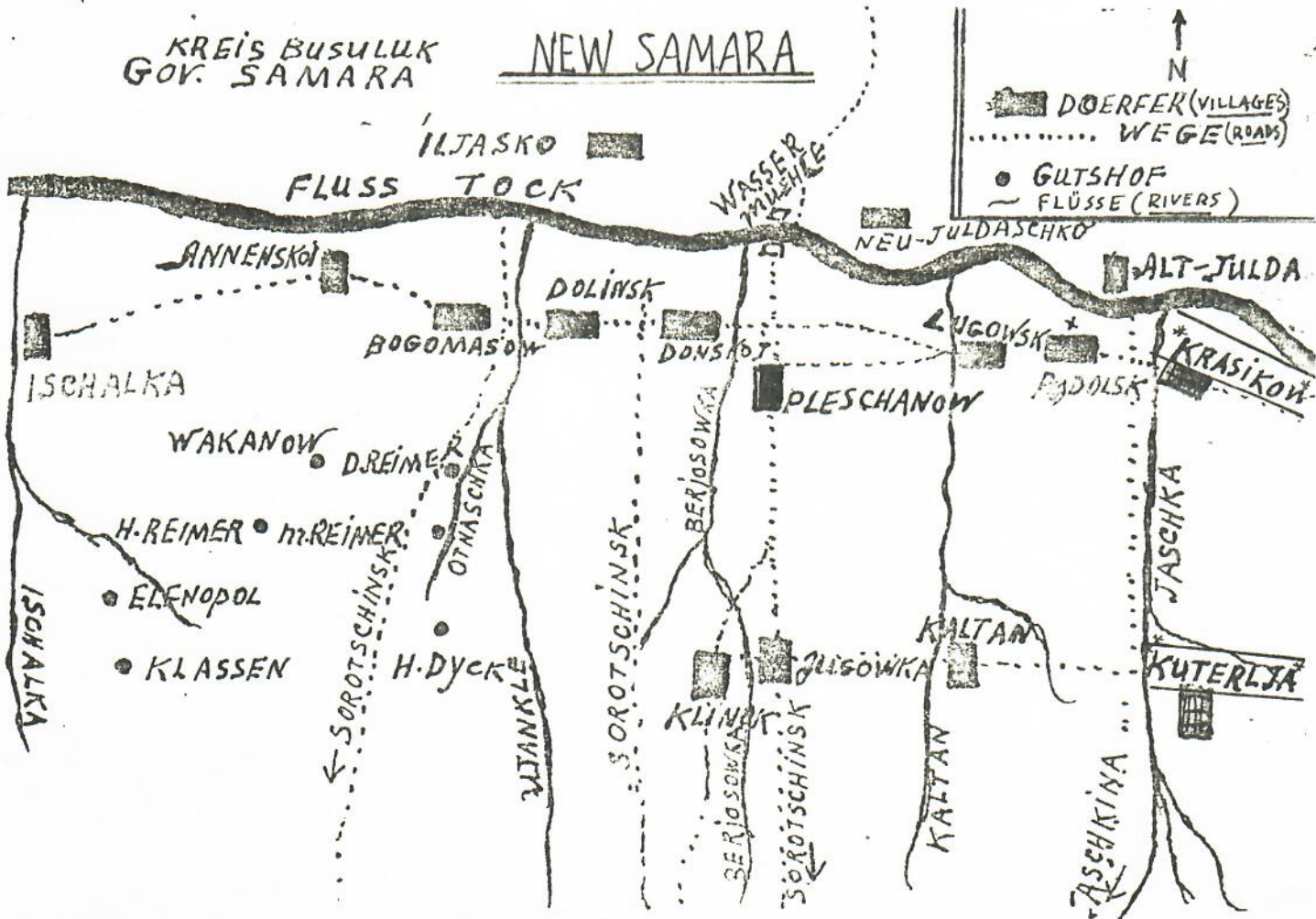
The 59,000 acres of New Samara was divided up into 12 villages. Gerhard(B3) took his family and settled in the south-eastern most

Map # 5

Eastern Europe - From Molotschna to New Samara



Map # 6 - New Samara



village of the colony called Kuterlja, where he received about 100 acres of land. It is not sure where Peter(C2) settled, though there was a church deacon named Peter Fast who lived in the central village of Pleschanowosk. Though the letter to the Mennonitishe Rundschau in 1901 (App. 3) suggests that Peter did live in New Samara, the daughters of Gerhard Fast contend that he lived in another colony.

When the Gerhard Fast family left the Molotschna in March of 1891 with three year old Maria(C2) and one year old Gerhard Jr.(C3) (Aganita C1, had already died in 1889), the snow had already left the southern Ukraine, and thus they found it quite shocking arriving in their new homeland only to find that the snow had not even begun to melt. The first year in the settlement was spent living with those who had come the previous year. The family soon built a little hut (Erdhuetten) made of clay, sod, logs and straw. These huts were built approximately one metre below and one metre above the ground. The door and window which they brought from the Molotschna were incorporated into the building. Although the clay huts were far from ideal, the family could keep from freezing during the long six month winter. The huts also provided an escape from the very hot and dry summers which central Russia experiences.

Gerhard's children attest to the fact that their father was a small man, but a very hard worker. He loved to farm and was quite successful with it. After a year in New Samara he built his first real house, a small but nice home to which they said: "Klien aber mein" (It's small, but it's mine). The early years in the new settlement were very busy ones. Gerhard was probably the only carpenter in his village, and thus his work was in demand. He built clothes closets, dressers, tables, beds, cribs, machines to clean the grain and also trimmings for doors and windows. In those days one couldn't just buy these items pre-made. Surely the long winter months provided Gerhard with the time to do this work.

Five children were born in the little house in Kuterlja: Jacob(C4-1892), Peter(C5-1894), Justina(C6-1896), Kornelius(C7-1897), and Suse (C8-1899) who died shortly after her birth. Gerhard worked hard and paid off his land debt to the Molotschna Colony. Although the land in Kuterlja was quite good for the production of wheat, Gerhard and his family decided in 1900 to sell their farm and buy a new plot of

land in the neighbouring village of Krassikow. By this time the family was already quite well off, so when they moved to Krassikow they built a nice big house of brick. Since Gerhard was a carpenter he was able to^{do} all the required woodwork in the house, and he also made all the needed furniture. In the process of building, Gerhard suffered a seemingly serious stomach injury while erecting the rafters for the roof. This injury was one of the causes of his death a few years later. In this new house three more children were born to Gerhard and Justina: Elisabeth(C9-1901), Susanna(C10-1903), and Abram(C11-1905).

The villages in New Samara had nice wide roads with nicely painted fences on both sides. The farms were all very clean and well kept. In front of every farm were beautiful gardens lined with fruit trees, flowers and vegetable plots. The house, barn and stall were all under one long roof, and opposite the house was a summer kitchen, bake oven and work shed. This set up was very similar to that of their forefathers in the Molotschna, Prussia and even the Netherlands. Families grew the fruit and vegetables for themselves, but their big crop was wheat, which they took for sale in Sorotschinkja(Soronschinsk?). Most families also had lots of cattle for which they grew corn, barley and oats.

Church Life

Christian faith was always central in the lives of Mennonites. Although many generations had passed since the days of harassment and persecution in Prussia and the Netherlands, the descendants of those "radical heretics" still kept the unique emphases of their faith. Central to their beliefs was believers baptism, non-resistance and opposition to the swearing of the oath. The Sunday morning worship services were very important in their lives. The old saying goes: Einem Mennoniten schmeckte ein Sonntag ohne Gotteswort wie eine Wasser-suppe ohne Salz (to a Mennonite, a Sunday without God's word is like soup without salt). In the early years of the New Samara Colony the villagers worshipped together in the homes or in the school building. In 1905 a large central church was built in the village of Pleschanow which then served the entire colony. Over the years the faithfulness of the colonists to the high ethical demands of their religion was

at times low, and church membership was no longer based primarily on conversion, but merely equalled the population of their settlements. Forbidden by the government charter of privileges to make converts among the natives, and kept from leaving their own religious group by the danger of losing their special privileges, the church size grew only as the community population grew. Although there were many splinter groups which formed over the years (still under the Mennonite banner), the Fast family kept their membership in the larger Mennonite (Kirchliche) Church. Although the religious atmosphere in the home of Gerhard Fast was not likely overly pious or zealous, it became evident in interviewing Gerhard's daughters that their faith was definitely real and central in their approach to life.

The religious convictions of the Mennonites often inspired them to reach out and help those who were in need. For example during the Russian-Japanese war in 1904/5, the Mennonites in New Samara took it upon themselves to provide for the families of the Russian soldiers who lived around their colony. They gave out substantial monetary and food aid, and they made sure that the fields of their Russian neighbours were getting plowed.

Tragedy in the Family

The years 1906 and 1907 were very difficult ones in the Fast household. On February 8, 1906, at the young age of forty-four Gerhard Fast died of "Leberkrebs", perhaps stomach cancer. It seems to have been related to his accident a few years earlier. Family tradition has it that Gerhard(B3) and his two brothers Johann(B1) and Peter(B2) all died at the age of forty-four. For Gerhard's family this was a very sad and traumatic time. To make things worse, mother Justina was also very ill at that time. Beginning that summer, the farm then had to be run by Gerhard Jr(C3) who was then only sixteen. With the help of the rest of the family and undoubtedly some kindly neighbours, the land was seeded. However the year of 1906 saw the worst drought ever in the history of the colony. The crop was totally ruined and no one in the colony made any money that year. The mother colony in the south fared better, and therefore shipped seed and flour to their brothers and sisters in the north. At this time many farmers from New Samara

left the colony and went further north to Siberia.

In March of 1907 death struck again. The youngest child Abram (C11) died five days before his second birthday. And then about a year later, the oldest son, Gerhard Jr. (C3) just reaching adulthood at age eighteen, also died. Undoubtedly these tragic days left many scars on the family.

Jacob (C4) was now the oldest son and he was soon able to take over the family farm. Like his father before him, he loved farming and became very good at it. Jacob's father had also taught his son the carpentry trade. With his father's many tools, Jacob could do a fair amount of carpentry on the side.

World War I

Up until the First World War the Russian Mennonites enjoyed in the land of the most autocratic ruler of all of Europe, a degree of religious toleration and civil liberty and special privileges unparalleled in all Mennonite history⁸. However this freedom did not last long into the twentieth century. The beginning of the end was marked in 1914 when Russia declared war on Germany. No sooner had the war begun when hate campaigns were initiated against the Russo-German colonists by the large and influential newspapers. Speaking the German language and being in close cultural relations with Germany, the Mennonites were suspected and openly accused of German sympathies. The first action against the German colonists was the decree of November 3, 1914 which forbade the use of the German language in the press or in a public assembly of more than three persons. The second action came in 1915 when it was announced that all German speaking colonists had to sell their land equities within a year. Fortunately the process of liquidation had hardly begun when the Russian Revolution of 1917 brought a temporary breathing spell from all the anti-German propaganda. Although the Mennonites had been in Russia for three to four generations, they were none-the-less treated like enemy aliens.

At the beginning of the war, the Mennonite church leaders were soon aware of the fact that there were some very difficult times ahead of them, especially since their convictions kept them from raising up arms against anyone. They came to the conclusion that they could not

stand idle as the war flared out, so as christians they felt their best service could be in the field of hospital work (Sanitaeter), the Red Cross, and also the forestry program which had already been in place since 1880.

In the spring of 1914 the young men of New Samara were called to Jekaterinoslaw to await their assignments. Most of the men from the colony were assigned to forest work near Petersburg until January of 1915, at which time the snow became so thick in the forests that they were sent to Moscow to aid in the hospital work. The war became bloodier as the German army persisted in pushing the Russian forces further and further back. The Russians then organized a train-transportation system from the war front to the cities where the hospitals were. The Mennonite men served in these "Front-Zuege"(front-trains), responsible for gathering up the wounded from the battle-fields, and then transporting them to the hospitals in Ekaterinslave and Moscow. These Mennonite units were reported to be among the best in the entire army. The entire expenses of the hospital workers, as well as the forestry work had to be met entirely by the Mennonites themselves.

Shortly before the outbreak of the war, Jacob Fast(C4) was mar-

ried to Margareta Janz, and a daughter Katharina was born to them in March of 1915.



← The picture to left shows Jacob Fast just before leaving for his alternative service assignment in 1914.

Revolution in Russia

The revolution led by Kerensky in March of 1917 brought an end to the Czarist regime and a breathing spell from the anti-German sentiment. The fact that this new regime claimed to rest upon a democratic basis was not altogether reassuring for minority groups who enjoyed special privileges under the Czars. The Mennonites organized a congress to negotiate certain privileges with the new government. The hopes of securing their lot was shattered when the Kerensky government fell in October of 1917 to the Bolsheviki led by Vladimir Lenin. The masses cried for "peace, land and Bread," and the Bolsheviki armed with the theories of Karl Marx, sought to meet that cry. By January of 1918 Lenin proceeded to rule by decree and ordered that all land owned by land-lords, crown and church be transferred without compensation to peasant land committees. The war was also brought to a close for Russia in March of 1918, with Russia having lost much land and millions of lives. With the war over, the Mennonite men, including Jacob(C4), returned home to their families.

Political instability reigned from 1917 to 1921. In January of 1918, an anti-Bolshevik Ukrainian nationalist group announced the establishment of an independent Ukraine. This was easier said than done for a lot of territory was already under Bolshevik control. As a result civil war broke out. The White army represented those who were hostile to the Bolshevik rule, while the Red Army was Lenin's military arm. For a time in the struggle, the Red and White Russian armies were fighting in amongst the areas settled by Mennonites. The battle lines continually moved back and forth across the colonies. For a while the Whites would control the territory, and then a little later the Reds would have control. Each army was always hungry and in need. As they occupied a specific territory they felt free to take horses, feed, wagons, bread, meat and clothes. Susanna(C10) remembers that not only was a lot of their grain taken by the soldiers, but the soldiers would also trade in their old worn horses for the finest horses which the East's and their neighbours owned. Each army did it's share of plundering. In order to try and keep it under control, the villagers would tell the occupying army how bad the other army had treated them, hoping then that the army in their midsts might have sympathy on them and therefore treat them a little better.

Between occupations, lawless hordes of roaming peasants and bandits primarily led by a certain Nestor Makhno, plundered the cities and villages, and as a result the Mennonites lived under the continuous fear of robbery, imprisonment, torture, rape and murder by these marauders. However because New Samara was 100 kilometres from the nearest railroad station, the residents experienced little of the terror experienced by their people in the southern Mennonite settlements. Fortunately, the Russian and Moslem "Baschkieren" natives who lived immediately around New Samara were quite friendly and did not partake in the type of banditry seen elsewhere. During this time many Russians were short on food. In New Samara few died of starvation, but there were lots of disease related deaths. Epidemics of typhus, cholera and malaria were spread by the armies and robber bandits. In New Samara alone, hundreds were struck dead by the diseases, paralyzing all organized life in the colony. Fortunately no one from the Fast family died from these epidemics.

Life Under Communism

By 1919 the Bolsheviks had control of New Samara. The communists had come into the village and helped the peasant Moslems organize for themselves. A village soviet was elected, and only the poor and the landless were allowed to vote. The communists tried to instill the hatred of the natives against the richer Mennonites. Persecution and abuse became the order of the day. The large farms and estates were all confiscated, including the one owned by Jacob, which was the biggest farm in the village. All the land was then re-organized on a socialist basis. All the land of the villages became one, and it was operated collectively. Large collectives were built which housed all the cattle and inventory of the village. Each person was then given a specific job to perform. Even the women had to leave their children in a type of day-care, and join the work force. The peasants in control were given specific quotas of grain which they were to collect from their soviet, and often these quotas were beyond the amount actually produced in a given year. Then soldiers would ^{be} given lists of individuals suspected of holding back grain, and they would do complete searches of these people's houses and barns. The Mennonite farmers had no say in the actions of the soviets, nor could they appeal actions taken against them. The prosperous years ^{of} tranquil and peaceful living in Russia had quickly come to an end for the Mennonites. Once again persecution con-

fronted the Mennonites, but this time it was primarily because of their industriousness and wealth, not so much because of their religious convictions.

In the years 1920 through to 1923, Russia experienced the worst drought in history. Normally a drought would not have been so devastating, but the conditions were not normal. With the loss of livestock and horses during the previous years of war, farming could not be carried on in a normal way. Heavy grain requisites left little for the surplus needed for emergencies and for the next year's seeding. Also the careless management of the larger estates, resulting from the replacement of industrious farmers by inefficient city-bred managers became another factor combining to spell disaster in those already dry years. In New Samara the people were so hungry that they would even eat the carcasses of the dead animals. Soon there were no cats or dogs or mice left in the *colony* that had not been eaten. Grass, bark and weeds were used to make flour for bread. In the East family no one had to go hungry, though the food was certainly rationed. Every morning mother Justina (widow to Gerhard-83) would bake numerous loaves of bread which the family would then hand out to beggars who came to the door. They had to keep their supply of flour hidden under the barn floor boards so that it would not be stolen. Again epidemics of typhus, malaria and cholera took a heavy toll among the people. Dead lay in the streets and in the houses. In the winter a sled would drive through the village and pick up the frozen dead bodies and bring them to the church cemetery for burial.

In desperation the Mennonites sent a four member committee west to plead for help from the North American Mennonites. As a result of the plight of Mennonites in Russia, the Mennonite Central Committee was organized in 1920. Their immediate aid averted heavy casualties among the Mennonites in the Soviet Union and among non-Mennonites living in the areas where the relief projects were undertaken. Food kitchens were set up and some fifty Ford tractors were sent to take the place of the large number of horses which had been stolen or confiscated during the period of civil wars.

Not only did communism bring on a severe economic crisis, but it also brought on a cultural crisis for all the Mennonites. It was clear

that the period of Mennonite isolation was over and that it would be only a matter of time before they would be gradually assimilated into the Russian populace. The schools were taken over by Communist teachers, and the Mennonites feared that their children would therefore become indoctrinated with the Communist philosophy. To the Mennonites, this was a bitter prospect.

However, the biggest problem the Mennonites had with their new Communist leaders was over religion. The persecution of the civil war period had brought a revival of spiritual interest and concern to the churches. It was inevitable that their new spiritual life should experience an even greater clash with Communist antireligious dogma and propoganda.⁹ The new decrees of the Communist government gave no religious group a privileged position regarding military sevice. Churches were closed and turned into theatres and clubrooms. Ministers lost all their rights and some were even exiled because they gave religious instruction to young people under the age of eighteen. Mennonite family life was slowly being systematically undermined. Communist propoganda made it clear that their socialist ideals were incompatible with religion. The problem was clearly perceived by the Mennonites as being not so much economic, but clearly religious. As a result many Mennonites were now seriously seeking a way to emigrate.

A Ray of Hope: The New Economic Policy

Russia had been brought to the brink of total ruin. In the face of desperate conditions in agriculture, commerce and industry, the Soviets were forced to compromise their Marxist ideology. The temporary relaxation of Marxism came in the form of the New Economic Policy in 1922. This brought a ~~general~~ revival of life to the Russian people in general, and to the Mennonites in particular. The government now encouraged self-initiative in allowing farmers to work their own land again. The grain quotas were cancelled, meaning that the farmers could once again sell on the open market. Moreover, a certain amount of religious freedom was again allowed, and a greater local autonomy was given in educational matters. For the Fast family in New Samara, this was certainly an answer to prayer.

A Fast Family Directory: Mid 1920's

By the mid 1920's the children of Gerhard Fast(B3) were married and had children of their own. Maria(C2) had married a Peter Schroeder. In 1910 they went north to Barnaul, Siberia where they stayed. In 1977 there were 112 descendants. No other information is known. Jacob(C4) and his wife Margareta had six children born to them in Russia: Katharina(D1-1915), Jacob Jr.(D2-?), Margaret(D3-1922), Sarah(D4-?), Maria(D5-1927), and Henry(D6-1919). Peter G. Fast(C5) married Maria Ewert in 1922. Their children born in Russia were: Tina(D1-1923) and Johann(D2-1924). Justina Fast(C6) married Peter Goerzen in 1918. They had seven children born to them, all of whom are in Russia. Kornelius(C7) married Katharine Penner and they had a daughter Jessie(D1) born in 1928. Elisabeth(C9) married Wilhelm Fedrau in 1921 and had one son Willy(D1), born in 1925. Susanna^(C10) married Heinrich Isaak in 1922 and had a daughter Justina(D1) born in 1923. All the descendants of Gerhard Fast(B3) lived in Krassikow. For more exact details, see Appendix 2.

Decision: Leave or Stay?

Many Mennonites were not sure if they could trust the Soviets. There was a desire among many to leave the country, but it was not clear where they could go. Finally North American Mennonites made the necessary arrangements to get the Canadian government to take the Mennonites into their country. After the war years the government in Canada prohibited the further immigration of Mennonites to Canada, but that was now over. The government remembered the Mennonite immigrants of 1874, and how they had proven themselves to be the best farmers in all of Canada, even if they were pacifist and German speaking. The Canadian Pacific Railroad still had vast stretches of sparsely settled prairie land in need of thrifty settlers. So the door to a new homeland was open.

Before taking any drastic actions, Mennonite leaders in Russia petitioned the Communist government to guarantee the Mennonites basic religious freedom. Besides freedom of worship and military exemption, they asked that they at least may have the freedom to train and educate their children in accordance with the commands of their conscience. The petition was outrightly rejected by the government.

The Soviets were not always open to having some of their best farmers leave the country. However, up until 1926 it was still quite possible for Mennonites to emigrate. Peter(C5), his wife and their three children decided that they should seek a new land, for Communist Russia did not hold much future prospect for them. In 1926 Susanna (C10) and her family together with her sister Elisabeth's(C9) family also decided to leave Russia for Canada. These families were able to sell their possessions and get good money for them. Kornelius(C7) and Jacob(C4) had become quite wealthy again, even having numerous servants around the house. They decided that they still had it too good in Russia, so they stayed back. Their mother Justina now at 67 years of age was the oldest in the village, and she felt that she was too old to start over again in a new country.

As a result of the New Economic Policy, the Mennonites were again allowed to manage their local affairs to a certain extent. As in the days before 1917, the Mennonites elected a magistrate for each village called a Schulze. A group of villages together formed a district called a Gebiet. A superintendent, called an Oberschulze, and his council regulated matters of local government that concerned the villages in common. Jacob(C4) became the Schulze in Krassikow, and then later elected Oberschulze for the whole region. Kornelius(C7) then took his older brother's spot as the Schluze of Krassikow.

Stalin's First Five Year Plan

After 1926 it became very difficult for any one to leave Russia. Then on October 1, 1928 a second drive of socialism was introduced in Soviet Russia under the First Five Year Plan. This time the Soviet's plans were better formulated and their execution was much more determined. All the renewed hopes which the New Economic Policy had brought in 1922 were now shattered. The parts of the plan effecting Mennonites the most were collectivization of agriculture, the renewed attack on religion, and the policies of education and indoctrination by the state.

The richer Mennonites were part of a class known as "kulaks", and the government decided to impliment tough measures against them (exile and deportation in many cases). There was a renewed drive to eradicate all religious activity, and as a result ministers were exiled, Sunday became a work day and intensive Communist indoctrination programs were

administered in the schools to all people of all ages.

Escape From Russia

As the pressures of 1928 and 1929 began to build, the Russian Mennonites turned to the west again in desperation. Hundreds and thousands of letters poured into the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) offices in North America pleading for help. The problem lay in the fact that Russia had closed it's doors and would not allow any more people out. The Mennonites did not know how they would be able to continue to worship in their officially atheist country. In November 1928 a mass flight of seventy Siberian Mennonite families went to Moscow in faith that somehow they could get visas to leave the country. These people insistantly badgered the officials and finally they gave in. The passports were granted, and those who passed a medical examination were free to go to Canada.

The news that seventy Mennonite families were granted emigration visas spread like wild fire. This was a signal for others to attempt to a similar escape. Jacob(C4) and Kornelius(C7) realized that it was simply too dangerous for them to stay in Russia, considering their wealth and position in the community. There was a good chance that they too could be persecuted and exiled. Perhaps they should try to get visas for Canada.

Mennonites began to publically auction off their belongings and then leave for Moscow, not knowing what their chances were of successfully leaving the country. Soon these auctions became illegal and fleeing to Moscow became very dangerous. In desperation Jacob(C4) and Kornelius(C7) decided that they, their families and their mother would secretly escape Krassikow one night. They told absolutely no one of their plans except two Moslem Baschkieren servants who had become family friends and would help them in their flight. In the dead of the night they left their homesteads towards the nearest railway station some distance away. They left all their possessions behind selling nothing lest their plan be discovered. They told their two servants that they could take anything they wished, for the Past's planned to leave Communist Russia forever. When they finally arrived at the first railway station they tried to buy tickets to Moscow, but they were refused. Undaunted, they decided to drive on to the next station. Here

they were asked many questions and they had difficulty explaining themselves and their actions. However by the grace of God, they eventually were granted tickets and were off for Moscow.

By October of 1929, there were about 1000 Mennonite families in Moscow seeking to leave the country. Many of them found temporary housing in the nearby suburbs, and many even had to turn to begging on the streets for their daily bread. The Russian government was not letting them leave, ^{however} yet the number of Mennonites flocking to Russia was increasing day by day.

From Moscow to Germany

When B. J. Unruh, a Mennonite professor in Germany became aware of all the Mennonites seeking to leave Russia, he began to do much intervening and arranging with both the German and Russian governments. On October 19, 1929 the German embassy in Moscow was informed that the 4000-5000 Mennonites in the Moscow suburbs would be free to leave the country if there was another country willing to take them. Germany could not afford to take them because of her financial difficulties. The Mennonites, however, all had their eyes set upon Canada as their new home. However Canada was in no mood to accept the Moscow refugees. With this major stumbling block, a second plan had to be put into action. The first step was to get Germany to admit the refugees on a temporary basis and simultaneously seek another country where the refugees might be landed permanently. B. H. Unruh began to notify relief agencies of the emergency. A German ecumenical welfare agency called "Die Bruder in Not" (The Brethren in Need) came to the rescue. This group appealed to Germans for sympathy and help. Their racial kinship was felt in their slogan: "The fate of a German is the concern of every German." The organization made it clear that if these refugees did not get immediate aid they would be surely shipped to Siberia where starvation undoubtedly awaited them. Because of the generosity of the German people and government, temporary refuge would be given the Mennonites wishing to leave Moscow.

By November 24, 1929 there were over 13,000 predominantly Mennonite refugees that had reached Moscow. Justina (06) and her husband Peter Goerzen had also made it to Moscow. Since the Soviets said that they were only going to let 4000 to 5000 people leave Russia, they

began sending people back. Jacob(C4), Kornelius(C7), Peter Goerzen and other Mennonite men were forced to sign that they would go back "voluntarily." To obtain these "voluntary signatures" the men were individually locked into air-tight rooms, which were then heated to a baking temperature. However, they did not return.

The Soviets let 5,671 refugees leave for Germany beginning on November 25, 1929. The families of Jacob and Kornelius were able to escape with this group, together with their mother Justina. Unfortunately, Peter and Justina(C6) Goerzen did not make it in this group. Peter was exiled to Siberia, and Justina had to return to New Samara with her six children. The couple was not re-united until 1967.

The Search for a Country

The refugees taken to Germany were divided up into three camps. The East's were all taken to the Camp at Prenzlau. As the refugees waited in the German camps, the Mennonites in North America were still trying hard to persuade the Canadian government to allow the refugees into the country. Finally a loop-hole was found. Earlier in 1929 the government signed an agreement with the Canadian railway companies that they could each bring in two hundred families from non-preferred countries. The railways favoured the Mennonites and as a result the door opened to Canada. The railways were able to bring over 1,123 Mennonites. Of the families that entered Canada, all individuals had to be healthy and willing to go into farming. Jacob(C4) and his family were hoping to come to Canada, but they were rejected because their daughter Sarah(D4) was sick. However Kornelius, together with his family and his mother were free to go to Canada.

Obviously dejected, Jacob and his family, together with the remainder of the refugees left in Germany had no idea of their fate. As they waited, a committee appointed by the Mennonite Central Committee was dealing with the problem of finding a location in which the refugees could be colonized. On January 25, 1930 the committee recommended the Paraguayan Chaco. There were several reasons for this decision.¹⁰ First of all Mennonites from Canada had reported to have established themselves successfully there, and secondly the colonists were granted permanent and absolute religious freedom. This promise included military service exemption and the assurance that they could

operate their own educational system without interference.

The Paraguayan government was very open to receiving more Mennonite settlers. Sarah's poor health would not bar the entrance of the East family; for Paraguay was opening it's doors to all refugees, regardless of health. Jacob, his family and the other refugees were worn from living so long under fear and uncertainty. They were very much attracted to the possibility of living in the closed, undisturbed pattern of life which they and their fathers had known before World War I. The land in Paraguay was cheap, and the challenge of pioneering and exploring a new country was exciting.

From Germany to Paraguay

The Mennonite Central Committee raised almost \$100,000 in a relatively short time for the purpose of moving and resettling as many refugees as were willing to go to Paraguay. H.S. Bender from Goshen Indiana was sent to Germany to organize the movement, ^{and} to negotiate with the German government and with the refugees regarding the plan of migration and colonization.¹¹ Another MCC representative, G.G. Hiebert from California, went to Paraguay to prepare for the reception and resettlement of refugees.

The MCC helped to arrange for a 40,000 acre plot of land which bordered the north-west boundaries of the colony set up by a group of Canadian Mennonites just two years earlier (Menno Colony-Paraguay, Map 7, p. 32). The colonists were to be supplied with some cattle and wells. After the first two years of settlement, the colonists were to pay back half of their crop until the land debt was paid off.

The first group of refugees left the temporary barracks in Germany on March 15, 1930. They were welcomed at the Paraguayan capital Asuncion by the Paraguayan President. From the capital they went by train to Puerto Casada where they met their Canadian brethren from the Menno Colony. Then by means of big two wheeled ox-carts, they came to a camp which had been set up for them on the outskirts of their proposed colony. They called their colony "Fernheim", a reflection of their obvious home-sickness for the life and land of days gone by.

Jacob and his family arrived on a later boat to Paraguay. They left Hamburg, Germany on the boat Vilagarzia and they arrived in Paraguay sometime in 1930. Jacob was 37, his wife Margareta 34, children: