Orenburg in the Urals

Peter P. Dyck

The following is a machine translation of the German language book ***Orenburg am Ural***, by Peter P. Dyck (1951). A scan of the Gothic script original was run through optical character recognition (OCR) and converted to Latin script by Conrad Stoesz using the Abby FineReader software. Glenn Penner then put this through the DeepL translator. This was heavily reformatted and edited by Erika Epp Marand, followed by light editing by Glenn Penner.

Note:

Page numbers do not follow those in the original.

Comments by Erika or Glenn are in square brackets.

Mennonite village names were standardized to follow those in the *Mennonite Historical Atlas* by Schroeder and Huebert.

Low-German words were spelled according to the *Mennonite Low German Dictionary* by Jack Thiessen.

No attempt was made to standardize any Russian or Ukrainian words.

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Orenburg in the Urals
The story of a Mennonite settlement in Russia

By:
Peter P. Dyck

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FOREWORD

Dear readers:

This book is a child of the 2 "reunions" held in the summer of 1946 in Abbotsford, B.C., and Coaldale, Alberta, of former Orenburgers. It was desired at that time, that the history of the "Orenburg Settlement in the Urals" be written, and the work was assigned to me. I agreed to do it if everyone, to the best of their abilities, would help with dates, personal experiences and truthful second-hand experiences.

This happened in part. First and foremost were the participants in B. C.; Alberta followed in second place, with strong participation from Coaldale, Gem and Rosemary - especially the latter. Paraguay did not miss out either, and Germany gave us Dr. Walter Quiring as a collaborator. Through him, the book was enriched with some major contributions. In addition, he edited all the material that had only partially been processed and prepared it ready for printing. To him and to all the other collaborators - brothers and sisters- I hereby express my very warmly felt gratitude! Against my wish, the dear people from B.C. have also supported me with funds. God will repay them.

While working on this book, I was often plagued by the wish that it would not be published. But it was not for me to decide. Some of the wounds received over there have so far only healed slightly and will probably bleed anew when I read the book….

It was not possible to give an exact, dated history as the documents are inaccessible over there and probably no longer exist. Despite these and many other shortcomings in the book, the attentive reader will not remain entirely without benefit.

With some trepidation that we send our rather weak little work into the Mennonite world with the request to show it some goodwill. "Test everything and keep the good."

We gave preference to the Latin script, thinking of our younger readers.

The printing and sale of the book was undertaken by Br. Abr. Loewen, R.R. 1, Abbotsford, B.C. He is also the proprietor of the "Christian Book Store."

It is signed by, united as one in our Lord,

P.P. Dyck

November, 1951

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I Farsighted care

1 When a "colonist" visits Orenburg…

When a guest from the mother colonies wanted to visit the settlement of Orenburg in the last years before the First World War, he stepped off the train in Platovka, in relief after a train journey of almost four days - depending on the season - to head for the settlement on wagons or sleds for a full-day journey; then a lot of very different impressions hit him. A new world opened up to him. First, he passed the large Russian village of Pokrovskov, then through a number of small Bashkir settlements or Russian villages if he took the more easterly route, then crossed streams and rivers and finally found himself in the "mountains", the foothills of the Urals/Obshchij Sert.

After climbing the last ridge before the settlement, his eyes, in the distance, catch sight of small green forests, quite far apart. Roofs peeked out through them. When one of these oases was reached, a mainly straight, wide road invited one to enter the village. On both sides, a wooden fence separated it from the farmyards. On the inner side were one or more rows of poplars or maple trees. Behind them, the traveller saw beautiful flowerbeds and ornamental shrubs.

The houses - stable and barn as one building - are in the style of his previous homeland. They stand along the length of the property, some of the barns also at right angles to the house and the stable. Many like this were to be seen in Aliessovo. From time to time, a home can be seen with its long side facing the road. On some buildings even verandas (porches) are visible. The rear facade of the house (the evening side - Owentsied) indicates an extension here and there. This is the so-called summer kitchen. Quite often there is an outbuilding at the front, not far from the neighbour's boundary. These vary in size and construction and serve as a workshop or also as a storage for farming equipment and tools. These buildings were usually the first or second shelters for settlers. At the end of the house facing away from the road are the frequently quite large straw and hay barns. Vegetable gardens and potato fields occupy the rear part of the property. Here the plots are closed off from the fields by a few rows of poplars which also serve as windbreaks. These rows of trees are very pretentiously called "forest" here.

In the centre of the village stands the, usually, stately school, generally built of sandstone, consisting of only one class and the teacher's residence - consisting of three rooms. On Sundays, the school also serves as a place of worship or church. Only Kamenka, most of whose inhabitants belong to the Mennonite Brethren community, had a meeting or prayer house at the end of the village; a name that may have taken from the Russian - molitwennej domm – Bethaus (German). In the Molotschna part of the settlement, each of the two communities had two prayer houses. Possibly this is why the schoolhouses were not built as solidly and were not so spacious.

This typical picture is enlivened by people and animals. Children romp around the farmyard, rarely in the street. Men, women and young people go about their business or stand by the road to see who this rare visitor, whose carriage accompanied dogs barking in different voices, might be for. Even very old people are not missing in this picture. They are busy with handicrafts in front of the front door or working in the garden. The men often wear the black sailor caps that probably originated from Friesland; the old mothers wear large bonnets decorated with lace, ribbons and flowers. During the working day, mothers and daughters wear a light, mostly white kerchief or a simple straw hat with a coloured brim and unobtrusive decorations to protect their heads. The clothing is simple and functional, designed only to protect the body. However, the colour and pattern of the fabric varies greatly. The mothers usually wear darker colours, while the dresses of the girls and children are more colourful.

The clothing of the male population, on the other hand, is more monotonous and generally in dark colours. In the warm season, trousers and shirt are sufficient. Adult males sometimes add a waistcoat or vest; the younger ones wear a shirt over the trousers according to Russian custom. This "blouse" is worn with a leather strap, a belt. Headgear here are hats and caps.

The whole picture gives the impression of modest prosperity, especially in comparison with the Russian or even Bashkir villages. Even small residential and commercial buildings do not detract from this image. The "colonist" - the Mennonite mother settlements in the Ukraine were called Colonies by those in Orenburg - sees himself here in a piece of rejuvenated homeland, and he soon feels at home.

In winter, the visitor is presented with a completely different picture. Then, especially in its second half, all the buildings are surrounded by metres of snow. Sometimes the low houses are even completely covered. The village then gives the impression of being shrouded or submerged. Huge masses of snow are blown into the rows of trees and hedges forming small "mountains" to the delight of the children who find ideal sledding and sliding tracks here. The clothing is also different in winter, but most of the children wear felt boots, even the girls, who, by the way, rarely wear winter coats, but almost always large, warm so-called kerchiefs; the boys wear fur hats, whereby the fur is usually worn towards the outside.

Even the visitor from the "colony" has to put on felt boots and a large sheepskin, which is usually black on the outside, for the long sleigh ride. The ride from the railway to the settlement can be full of surprises in winter. The narrow roadway is very rutted and quite capable of tipping the vehicle over. A skilful carter jumps off at the critical point, stops and supports his sleigh. For this reason, he sometimes sits on the front seat, the coachman’s trestle, with his feet outside the sleigh. If, on the other hand, the carter sits in the back next to the guest, he will keep his leg on the outside in readiness to prevent him from tipping over, although this is not always successful.

As the roadway is very narrow (in winter in Orenburg one generally drives sleighs with one horse, if there are two horses, one is harnessed in front of the other), the deep, often loose, snow on the sides makes if easy to dodge (oncoming traffic). If someone wants to overtake another, the slower person usually stops to let the person in a hurry pass. For the horse this overtaking is an effort. It jumps ahead, but repeatedly sinks up to its belly in the snow, picks itself up, makes another jump until it has the firm track under its hooves. The animal-loving carter can help him a lot by dismounting and leading him by the bridle. The snow carries a man more easily, especially when his felt boots are already somewhat "worn out". They almost look like skis. Sometimes the horse comes out of the shafts, but with some skill of the carter it can be brought back under or between the towbars. If this is not successful, everything has to be unhitched; first the horse and then the sleigh has to be brought onto the secure track. Settlers usually help each other in such cases.

It is different when you meet each other. Then it is easier for horse and sleigh to past each other. The sleighs are built in such a way that they cannot get entangled. However, collisions are unavoidable, and the lighter vehicle is naturally pushed to the side.

It is not surprising that such a snowy and frosty winter sometimes brings with it adventures of a special kind. This is what Preacher Dietrich Lepp, from Deyevka, told us about one occasion:

"It was winter. We were in Pokrovskov and wanted to go home. As a snowstorm, a “buran”, was approaching we joined a small convoy and set off. I was the last to leave and made myself comfortable in my empty grain sleigh, the so-called "Schleife" (“ribbon” - a wide, mostly bare sleigh without sides). I sat on a sack of fodder and had my feet wrapped in a fur blanket. The path had deep, rutted holes, but we advanced well. My horse did not need any

encouragement. So, I tied the lead to the sleigh and put my hands into the sleeves of my fur. This way, I could pursue my thoughts undisturbed.

Suddenly I felt a violent jolt. I flew up into the air with my sack and blanket and landed quite roughly on the hard track behind my sleigh. Before I come to my senses, the convoy of sleighs disappears from my sight. My own transport is also gone. The air was hazy and a light drift of snow had set in. Calling out was useless, as the wind was against me. But perhaps they might accidentally notice my absence, I think. So, I prepare myself for a long wait. Then I see something black moving towards me from the direction of Pokrovskov. A sleigh? No, it's too small for that. A horse? A dog? Yes, it might be a dog, but - an unusually large one. Only when the animal is very close do I recognise it - it is a huge wolf. Its fur bristles, it bares its teeth but, seeing me ready to attack, sidles past me. I was not at all prepared to attack, but I was infinitely glad that the wolf seemed to think so and took my stance into account. "God, I thank you for this visible miracle," I prayed. It didn't take long before I was picked up by a following sleigh…."

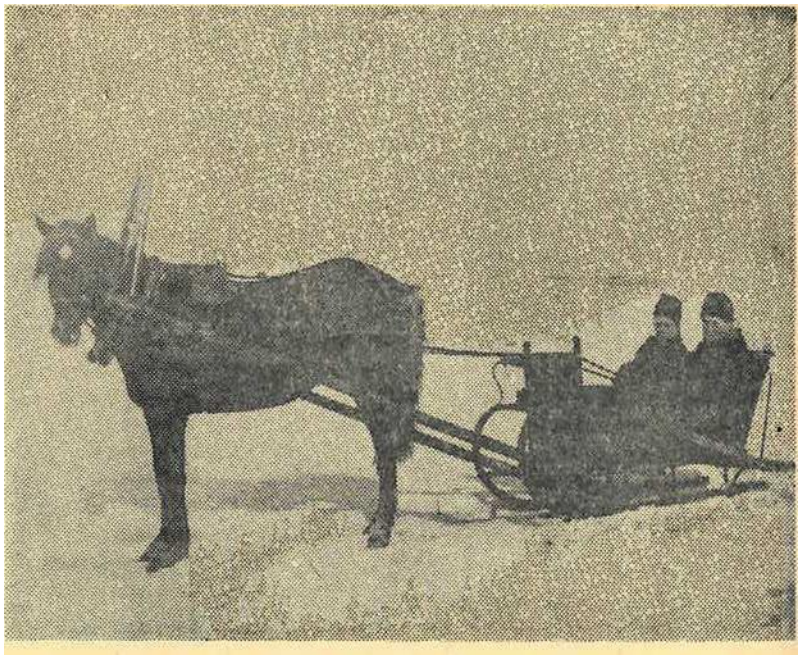
In the course of the years, this and similar experiences were to be repeated many times. They provided much entertainment during the long winter evenings. But not only in the evenings. In the winter, the Orenburg farmer was by no means very busy, and even on weekday afternoons he often found time to visit this or that neighbour. It was not unusual for him to take his wife and small children with him on such extended visits. The conversation did not stop even when the more or less real coffee aroma rose from the table and invitation was given to eat the inviting baked goods. The “long stove”, which usually had the task of warming three rooms at once, was pleasantly warm. Outside, however, the buran raged. In huge shrouds it swept the snow through the street and over the roofs of the houses. In the wood beams and roof boards the frost cracks and crackles. Woe to the traveller who must now be on the road.

It is considered good form to go home to “care” for the cattle, even if adult sons can cope with the work alone. And when the stove at home radiates new warmth from heated straw or burning dung; when the boys come into the parlour with faces red with cold; then dinner is to be eaten. Very often it is fried potatoes and “prips” (coffee substitute) with bread that is served. Bread toppings are rare. Butter is not exactly scarce, but it is an important source of income. Jam, however, is practically unknown, as Orenburg hardly grows any fruit. For one thing, the climate is not very favourable to the growth of fruit trees, and for another, bark is gnawed off year after year by rabbits. Here and there, syrup is made from sugar beets or occasionally from watermelons.

Thereafter the family gets together in the corner room or even in the great room by the stove. The women take up needlework. A conversation soon begins. Everyone listens eagerly to the parents telling their stories. They often go into great detail. They often talk about the difficult early years, the great lack of everything: of money and vehicular power and timber and, unfortunately, also of bread. But time and again they found a way out of the most difficult situations, even if it was not their own doing. Their diligence and perseverance did not go unrewarded. God continued to help.

If a guest from the South is present, he is all ears. One prejudice after another, which he brought with him from his homeland against these pioneers, disappears. He soon realises that these people have been misjudged, and that he is here with his own kin; the people of Orenburg are no different from "Colonials", neither in diligence nor in cleanliness, nor even in their piety. That they are somewhat different in some respects from the Mennonites in the South may be due to the different circumstances. Their relatives and friends in the Ukraine also have to work hard, but their struggle is not as difficult as that in Orenburg. Their soil is more fertile and the climate incomparably more favourable to grain growing than here.

Little was known of Orenburg in the South in the early days of its existence. It was located somewhere at the "end of the world", at least very far away "in Siberia". It was supposed to be extraordinarily cold there, so that the inhabitants were forced to wear their felt boots, even in the summer! And then there were the many wild animals! And also, the local population - Bashkirs, Tatars, Russians and others - they were supposed to be exiles, convicts who had to stay there for Russia's safety. No, for those who could, they preferred to stay in the cultivated South. But not everyone could stay there. The German south was overcrowded. The land was unavailable, and poverty was great among the many landless. The relationship between the haves and the have-nots grew more contentious every year. Among the landless it was growing. The young Mennonite men did not want to remain dependent servants all their lives.



For the strong steppe horses, it was no particular effort to trot 40 miles a day with such a sleigh. And for the people, wrapped in warm furs, it was a real pleasure ride through the wintry landscape.

2 *The mother colonies buy land*

The Chortitza Mennonites had immigrated to Russia in 1789. In their mother country they had already belonged to the "people without space". In West Prussia, however, the acquisition of land had been made more difficult for them, the “conscientious objectors”, for reasons of military and church policy. These conscientious objectors were not looked upon favourably in the border areas.

In the South Russian steppes, the immigrants saw a whole ocean of free land before them. The government gave them the best farmland, more than they could use at the moment, almost free of charge. The comparison with the torturous confinement in their old homeland was self-evident. And they were determined to do everything in their power to prevent the same confinement from arising here through thoughtless short-sightedness.

The Mennonite population was growing extremely fast and it was foreseeable that the mother settlements would be overfilled and the land given by government, settled. Therefore, timely precautions were to be taken to find alternative accommodation for the landless population, mostly young married couples. The idea was not trade or commerce or migration to the city, but new rural settlements. Their children were to remain farmers.

Around the middle of the last century, the far-sighted settlement policy of the mother colonies began. This was to prove extraordinarily successful in the future. They bought land, mostly from impoverished and indebted Russian landowners, and sold it on to their landless families under acceptable conditions. This is how the daughter settlements came into existence: Bergthal in 1836, Chernoglas in 1860, Kuban in 1863, Grossfuerstenland in 1864, Borozenko in 1865, Nikolaipol in 1869, Sagradovka in 1870, etc. Chernoglas and Grossfuerstenland were located on leased land

In the winter of 1892-93, a commission was sent to the Orenburg district, where Russian landowners, the Deyevka brothers, had offered land. The timing of the visit to this land was not very fortunate. The Volost, or rather the Land Commission, may have disregarded the fact that the climatic conditions on the southern foothills of the Urals are considerably different from those in the steppes around the Black Sea. Whereas here the snow stays only for a short time, in Orenburg it usually "snows up" in October to thaw again only in April. For this reason, the soil could not be examined at all, indeed, the commission was not even able to get to know the terrain. For in Orenburg, the only way to get around off the road in winter is on skis.

Nevertheless, the purchase was completed in the winter. One acted at random and relied on one's luck. The mother colonies had always been lucky in their land purchases. They had not considered that it would have been almost impossible to find bad land in the Ukraine. Moreover, the chosen land was about 50 to 70 kilometres from the nearest railway station and 70 to 100 kilometres from the city of Orenburg.

At that time, Johann Froese from Schoeneberg was the Oberschulze (mayor or top executive official of settlement) in Chortitza. He soon had a hard time due to the land purchase. For months the Orenburg purchase held people in anticipation. The land commission claimed that the purchased land was good and cheap. It only cost 25 rubles per desjatine. But there were already quite a few land experts and well-travelled men among the Mennonites. The land commission pointed out in vain that the Molotschna mother colony had only a few years ago, bought land in the neighbouring district of Samara and founded the settlement of Neu-Samara or Pleshanovo. Now, they were considering buying 14,000 desjatines, also from a Deyevka, for their own landless, adjacent to the land already bought from Deyevka.

But the many pros and cons did not change the fact that the 25,000 desjatines, increased by almost 1,000 desjatines due to necessity, were now the property of the Chortitza Volost and had to be settled willy-nilly. There were many landless people in the old colony who were impatiently waiting for the founding of a new daughter colony.

Landless Mennonites in Ukraine were often settled at the end of the village or in a row of houses running parallel to the village street. There they may have had their own small plot of land and a cottage, but no land of their own. They were dependent on working in the village as day labourers or earning their living as carters, as craftsmen, tradesmen, etc.

The peasants were of course happy to get rid of their landless by founding new daughter settlements. The tensions between them and the landless were increasing from year to year. Some family relationships were severely poisoned by these unhealthy social issues. All those involved were equally happy when the opportunity arose to transfer the surplus population to Orenburg.

Within a short time, several hundred families registered for the new settlement at the regional office in Chortitza. Immediately, the sale of houses and movable property began. With the sudden mass sales, however, a fall in prices was inevitable, and the landless experienced their first disappointment. They would no longer be able to afford everything they thought they had to buy to take with them, and in addition, money in the new settlement would be even tighter than they had feared. But in the end, they were comforted by the prospect of soon being full landlords and owners of no less than 40 desjatines of land. In addition, they were to be exempt from all taxes and payments in Orenburg for two years.

But despite the low prices for house and land, the young settlers had far more money in their hands than they were used to. This may have caused some the loss of sobriety and led to unnecessary expenses which would have been better left undone in the interest of the difficult new start.

The village of Schoenhorst, by the way, gave each of its departing families a 200-ruble allowance for which they then had to sign a release freeing the mother colony of all claims.

3 *The great journey*

Finally, the longed-for day of departure has arrived. Volost Land Commission has obtained reduced fares for the settlers and a greatly reduced freight tariff. This means that they can take the most essential farm equipment, household goods and clothing with them. The majority of the prospective landowners look to the future with hope. After all, becoming a full landowner was the goal of their aspirations. And why shouldn't they also achieve what their parents and grandparents succeeded in doing?

Four long railway trains accommodated 5 "villages". Those who lived further away from Chortitza, for example on one of the daughter settlements, travelled either individually or in small groups directly north-eastwards. These settlers also enjoyed the benefits granted by the railway.

Reloading for the old colony is in Alexandrovsk (later Zaporozhe) on the Dnieper. Some make their way there via Einlage, others via Nieder Chortitza. In both cases the Dnieper had to be crossed. It was still frozen, but because of the mild weather not quite safe. The roads, however, are still good because the earth has not yet thawed.

After the dreaded river has been crossed and the left bank climbed, we hurry towards Alexandrovsk. Many women have never seen this city, or any city at all. They had only heard about the railway. The new world captivates them and the children so much that for a few moments they even forget the pain of parting they had just experienced. Even the unfamiliar shuffling and shaking on the bumpy pavement of the city goes almost unnoticed.

They arrive at the station. Here, too, there is so much to see that is new. The big black locomotives hiss so frighteningly and emit great clouds of dark smoke. And then the shrill whistle! It is almost deafening. The wagons are jerked and jolted back and forth with reckless abandon, so that the settlers think that everything will fall to pieces. How narrow the railway tracks are. Derailments are almost inevitable on such a long journey.

Fortunately, the excited ones do not quite come to their senses. First, they have to go to the waiting rooms. Here too, in the third class, there is enough to observe of that is unfamiliar. Food can be bought at the buffet. The prices, by the way, are almost sinful. But they are well provided for; for more than a whole week. They have baked whole sacks of rusks. And then the canned ham and the sausages. For the first few days there are some roasted chickens in the belly-shaped cooking pots. The necessity waiting is calming. Mothers have their hands full answering the many questions of their little ones, keeping the boys close to them and satisfying all the many needs. If only the lavatories were not so incredibly dirty!

Finally, the men arrive. They wipe the sweat from their heated faces. They have just had their first unpleasant experience. Railway employees see this as a good opportunity to make easy money. Every self-evident fact is interpreted as a courtesy and valued so and so highly. The settlers are expected to pay. Not much, but a ruble here and 50 kopecks there. Even with the mediation of their fellow-believers helping them through the maze of the station and the many unknown regulations, it still costs a lot of money. And then the tickets and the freight. "Nue kohmt uck schwind, sest foaht de Zuch noch ohne ons wajch..."(Come quickly or the train will leave without us.) In a great hurry they reach for their things. Head over heels, they rush towards the waiting train and climb into the wagons assigned to them.

Relatives and friends escort some of them. Parents, siblings and friends are standing outside the train. Dear acquaintances have also come to the railway to witness the departure of the "Orenburgers". Only now do the settlers realise what they are leaving behind: the community, the church and the schools. And then their families. With roots in tact, they are torn out of the

fertile soil. But there is no other way. The old home is overfilled, has become too crowded. Here they have to suffer, become proletarians. And besides, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"Pau, foah wie aul?" (Pa, are we moving?) the daughter of a young farmer wants to know. "Nae, nue haft de Tjeadel wada Tiet!" (No, now the guy has all the time in the world!) But suddenly there is a violent movement backwards and an even harder one forwards, which creates a big rumbling in the car. With a shrill whistle from the locomotive, the long line of wagons starts to move. The fateful journey has begun. Mother, holding the hot kettle of coffee ready, almost fell from her seat with the sudden jolt. Some of the children fell but nothing was harmed. After recovering from the initial shock, it is laughed off, only the little girl asks anxiously: "Waut wea daut, es de Zuch nue entwei?" (What was that, is the train broken?) No, it had remained whole and gently started to roll.

The re-settlers crush against the doors and windows. Those who stayed behind wave. "Goodbye! Have a good trip! And write soon!" Then the train turns a corner and the station disappears from their view.

Silently, father and mother sit, absorbed in deep contemplation. The children also become quiet. They seem to be afraid of something unknown and seek the proximity of their parents. "Mau, woaromm hielst?" (Ma, why are you crying?) her little boy wants to know when he notices a few beads of tears on mother's cheeks. Mother quickly wipes them away. Father, too, seems to be seized by the moment. He swallows a few times, but then gets a hold of himself again. Just don't go soft. He of all people must keep a cool head.

Then the mother reaches into one of the travelling bags and hands father a thick, black-bound book. Grateful and somewhat surprised, father looks at his wife. Once again, she has hit on the right thing, as she has done so often before. He flips pages in the book, then closes it again and opens it at random. He has opened it at the 23rd Psalm, a familiar comforting one. He reads it aloud. He then carefully chooses Matthew 28, the last verse, and the little very attentively listening little daughter, suddenly asks: "Pau, es Jesus uck hia em Zuch?" (Pa, is Jesus here on the train?) "Joh, min Tjind, he es uck hia, he es emma bi ons." (Yes, my child, he is here, he is always with us.) The child is reassured. The parents have also regained their composure. With Jesus it will be all right!

However, loading did not go off without bruises and scratches and without tears in the clothes. But that has to be accepted when setting out on such a journey. Mother immediately gets the opportunity to repair minor damage. Even the smallest one makes demands loudly. The boys and girls crowd the windows and repeatedly call out: "Mau, tjitj, Mau, tiitj doch!" (Ma look; Ma please look.) But mother has other things to do. They've all become hungry by now and are looking forward to a sip of coffee. Especially father after the hardships of loading.

Ratata! Ratata! that's how the wheels beat time. It is somehow reassuring, this rhythmic knocking. The train stops many times on this journey. Often, they have to wait a long time, especially in the big cities of Kharkov, Tula and Penza. But they have time. They can only access their land after the snow has melted. And the winter is supposed to be long and cold up there. The travellers have to endure many unexpected jolts, usually they laugh about it, but sometimes they cry. But curiosity remains alive throughout the days. What a beautiful and interesting world it is. Daily there are so many new things to see. Unfortunately, the father rarely allows the children to leave their "house on wheels" to go out onto the platform. The times of departure are too indefinite. Gradually, however, even this adventurous journey becomes a daily routine to which one has become accustomed, just like the children's questions "Send wie nue boold doa?" (Are we there yet?)

The further north they go, the wintrier the landscape becomes. The leafy deciduous forests of the Kharkov give way to dark green coniferous forests higher up. As the travellers approach the Volga after a demanding week, the landscape takes on the familiarity which they are used to at home - it becomes flat. Then comes Batraki. They approach the famous Volga Bridge. Finally, they reach it. Seen from the side, it looks not unlike the bone structure of a very large worm. The train stops just before the bridge. Is it afraid to trust this steel structure? All the windows are occupied. Eyes and ears are busy. Now and then a slight sigh of prayer can be heard. But then the familiar jolt comes again, and the train slowly pushes onto the bridge. It becomes quiet in the carriage. Pillar after pillar whizzes by. The bridge seems endless. Then a shrill whistle, and again the rails run on ground. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief and the mouths start to move again. The ground is safer than such a bridge high above the water, they think. After a short day's journey, they are in Samara (Kuibyshev) - back along the Volga.

Now, at last, the parents can answer their children: "One more sleep, then we'll be there." And really, father and mother are right. The train stops in Platovka. The wagons are pushed onto a side track and uncoupled. They have reached their destination. Immediately the unloading begins. The young people rejoice. They feel as if they have been given back their freedom. But these snow drifts here! They tower high in front of them. In some places they almost reach half the height of the telegraph poles. That makes some people quite pensive. There is an excited debate on the train. Someone claims that there has been snow here for 10 months. So, when should they then sow, and above all: the grain cannot ripen here at all! But their land was also selected in winter. You can get away with that with the poor landless and the residents. The rich farmers would not have put up with such a thing. The excitement is growing. Shouldn't we rather turn back? But the expenses! And then: what should they do in the "colony"? No, he who starts A must continue to B. Now we just have to hang on.

There are no houses to be seen near the station, but people will live here somewhere where the train passes through. But one family decisively packs up their things, buys tickets for the first westbound train and turns their backs on their new home before they have had a chance to get to know it. They won’t chance a winter of "13" months.

The railway station is teeming with carts, small Russian sleds -- harnessed to a little horse and the high-bowed sleigh, the duga (arc). News has spread like wildfire through the large Russian village of Pokrovskoye, 4 versts from Platovka: "The Njemze (Germans) are coming!" So off to Platovka. There might be something to earn there. Some of these Njemze had come through here before. Good people. The Russians, also knew that the Germans had bought a lot of land from the Deyevka estate owners in Orenburg. They are said to have bought it at a sinfully high price. But there is no time to gossip about it now. The Njemze are here and they all want to go to Pokrovskoye. A price is quickly negotiated, then families and belongings are loaded, and off they go in a race through countless holes towards the Russian village.

The main thing now is to find accommodation. But this involves far fewer difficulties than the re-settlers had feared. The Russians are happy to give up one or more rooms. They themselves huddle together in a small room. A single room costs one ruble a month, and whole houses with several rooms, 3 to 5 roubles. One settles in as well as one can in these conditions. There is so much to marvel at about the Russians and their way of life. But the Russians are also amazed at their houseguests. How strange these Germans are! They seem to have a formal obsession with cleanliness. They wash themselves and their children often. And what strange meals these women know how to prepare. Just like in the city! But there is no prejudice or mistrust on either side. The Germans quickly settle in. The language difficulties are soon

overcome. Here and there even friendships are formed. They are happy to have survived the long journey and to have been spared any misfortune.

Soon more transports arrive and they all find accommodation in the Russian village. Some families, however, cannot stand this unbearable sitting around. They buy a horse and sled, pack up their family and the few possessions they have and set off for the Deyevka land.

4 Orenburg District

The district occupies the southern most part of the Ural Mountains. Its name, by the way, does not come from the German word Ohr, but, according to Russian studies, from a dried-up stream called Ori. The district city lies where the Samara-Tashkent railway crosses the Ural River. The northern part of the district is heavily forested, while the southern part consists mostly of mountainous or largely hilly, generally forest-free plateaus. These are intersected by smaller rivers, occasionally by deep gorges caused by meltwater.

At the time of the immigration of the Mennonite "Colonists", the population of the district consisted of Bashkirs, Tatars, Mordovians, Chuvash and Russians. The Tatars were more industrious and had a strong sense of honour. Their word meant something. Among the Russians, the Cossacks formed a special group. They used to guard the borders against the raids from the east and were, due to their privileged position, considered particularly loyal to the emperor.

The settlements of both the Russians and the Mohamedans are mostly far apart. The courtyards are as enclosed, probably because of the earlier, frequent robberies or also because of the wolves. The home is usually surrounded by stables, wood stores, high fences or mud walls. For the winter, the whole courtyard was often covered with a roof of hay or straw. For this purpose, some longer posts were dug in as supports, connected with thinner tree trunks and covered with shrub and straw. A slab of ice often served as a window. Such yards are of great benefit, especially in the frequent snow storms. In the villages along the major roads, these closed courtyards often served as hostels for travellers. On the way to the city, people usually spent the night with Shishkino, Repino or with the Staretzes (old believers). Here everyone found accommodation for little money. The designation of these driveway courtyards was a broom with the straw end pointing upwards.

The hostel itself, a single room in the residential house, is usually quite poor and also served as the owner's family's living and sleeping quarters. The guests slept on the floor, under the table or on the benches, if they were not too narrow. Some straw or their own fur served as a base.

The family of the innkeeper was to be pitied. Their sleeping places were usually above the high stove, and the air there in that narrow space was even worse than on the floor. But the guests came day after day, all winter long. But the Russian was also in need of the scarce kopeks.

For those who had a good acquaintance in such a Russian village, they naturally preferred to stay with him. In these driveway courtyards in Orenburg, the city, - the most frequented was Horn's - conditions were somewhat better, especially at the German innkeepers. After the harvest, the inns in the city were also always overcrowded. As soon as the evening meal was over, the tables were set up as sleeping places. Of course, there were also hotels in town with rooms in different price ranges, but what farmer could afford a room with the low wheat prices? Besides, the hotels usually had no stables.

At that time, tilling the fields was extremely primitive among the locals. A wooden plough made from a suitable tree trunk was used to plough and even used break up the meadow. The plough was pulled by several oxen at a very slow pace. While some of the drivers tried to increase the snail's pace of the animals, the man at the reins had a hard time keeping the plough in the furrow, and in the ground at all.

In spring, the farmers carrying a seed bag filled with wheat, stumbled over the uneven land and spread the seed by hand. They were followed by wooden harrows interwoven with shrubbery to level the bumpy ground. Long rows of these harrows, each harnessed to a horse,

could be seen on the fields. Only the front team of such a harrow group was led by a mushik (peasant), the next horse was tied to the front harrow, the third to the second and so on. Durum wheat was satisfied with this primitive cultivation and usually gave a satisfactory, not infrequently even rich harvest.

However, a self-binder could not be used on such a bumpy field, not even the scythe worked well. Only the curved sickle helped here. The work of cutting was mostly done by the women. They cut grain rather high and tied the short sheaves together with a previously prepared string of reeds. The men then set up the sheaves.

The fields were threshed with steam threshers of German or English manufacture. The field was then swarming with one-horse harvesters, which were made almost entirely of wood. Their capacity was adapted to the power of the horse. The cleaned wheat was filled into sacks and loaded onto small wooden wagons, which were usually pulled by camels and brought to the city. Often cargo was also loaded onto the camels. Each of the animals then had to carry four 140-pound sacks. To be loaded, the camel had to kneel down, to which it usually protested with a groan and a sigh. The difficult process of getting up was equally noisy. Now the animals were coupled together in such a way that the reins of the second camel was attached to the tail of the first and so on. To prevent the animals from going their own ways, a small post was pulled through their noses and a rope was attached to it. A caravan leader, often a Kirghiz, would ride on a small horse next to the lead animal which he led by the bridle.

For the farmers, on the other hand, the sheaves were gathered on the threshing floor and threshed with a stone. Where there was no stone, the grain was "trod out". To do this, one of the horses was harnessed in front of the small wooden cart, the “tjelega or povoska”, and the others were tied to the sides and back. The owner took a seat in the cart, and then countless rounds began. Meanwhile, the other household members had to loosen up the threshing floor by constantly turning it over and shaking it. The grain could only be cleaned in the wind, which separated the grain from the chaff when it was tossed up with a wooden shovel.

The tjelega mentioned above served many purposes. For the transport of grain its trough-shaped top was lined with a homemade woven blanket. These blankets were made of hemp, flax or wool. The grain, about 700 pounds at a time, went into the container created in this way. The corners of the blanket were held together with small wooden pins. On longer journeys, a wooden container of tar usually hung on the side of the tjelega, as the wooden axles had to be lubricated from time to time along the way. If, on the other hand, hay, straw or dung had to be driven, the wooden rack was replaced by a ladder rack. This offered no difficulties because everything was tailored to the pulling power of a single horse. If an axle broke on the way, it was easily and cheaply replaced in almost every village. Iron-shod wagons were rare among the locals in those pioneer days. The same applies to the sleds. The cheapest ones were held together by a few iron bolts, otherwise everything was made of wood and raffia ropes. These sleds, as well as the wagons, were generally short-lived and slid or skidded easily because of the lack of iron runners. This accelerated their wear and made it difficult for the horses to pull. But there were also good and practical sleds for those road conditions. But they were expensive, and the poor peasants could seldom afford such a product made in large factories.

Light carriages known as tarantasses were also factory products. Cheaper ones had flexible round longitudinal bars that connected the front and rear seats. These bars were somewhat springy. The more expensive tarantasses had steel springs on the rear axles. Instead of seats, they had a beautifully woven wicker basket, usually painted black, with a padded back. There were also tarantasses with rubber tires. On difficult roads or on the way to a wedding, 1 or

2 horses were harnessed to the lead horse, which walked in femer bars. The horse in the bars had to trot while the other 2 galloped.

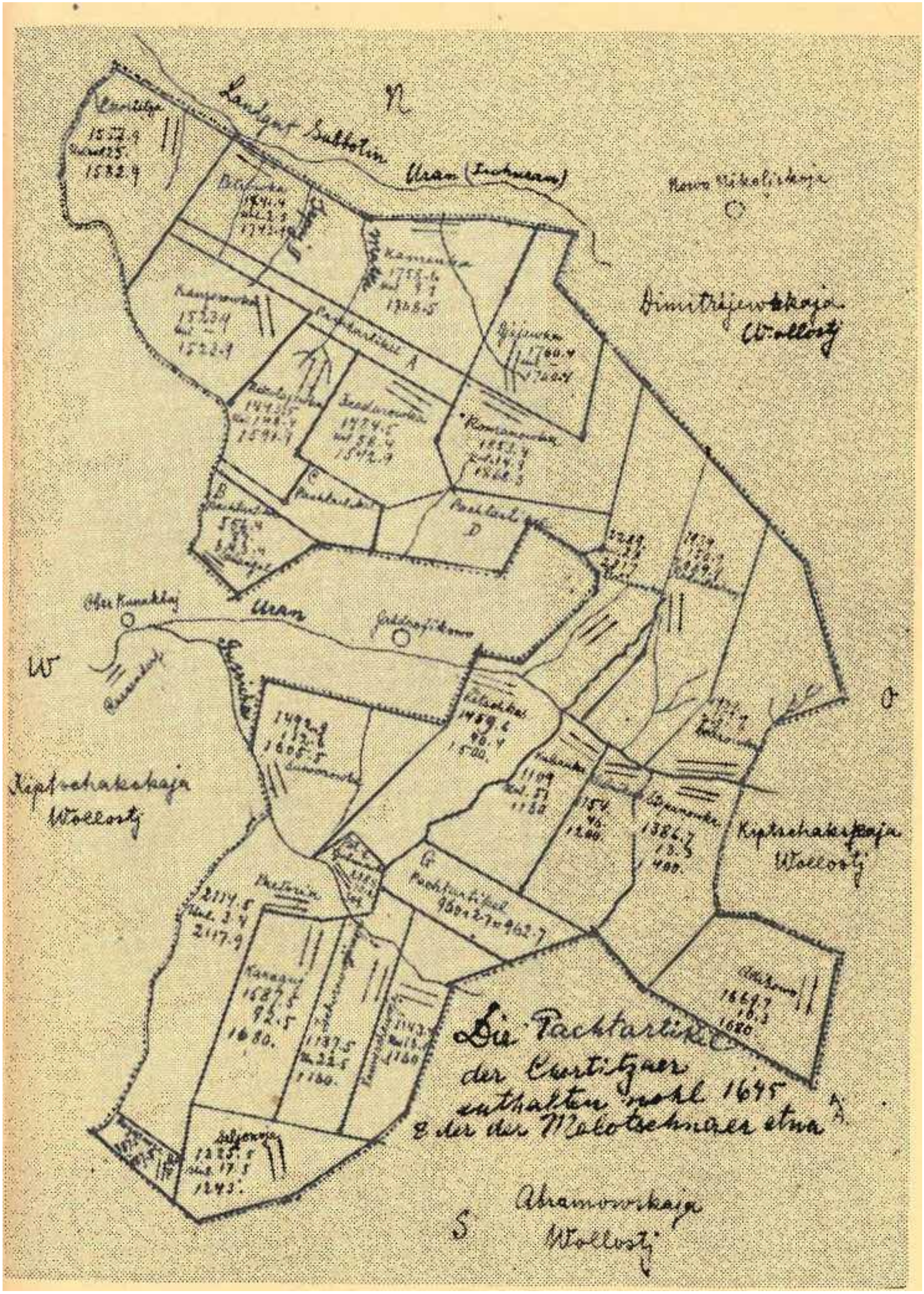
In winter, as I said, only 1 horse was usually harnessed. If a second horse had to be used, it was not harnessed next to the first, but in front of it. This goose-like order - the colonists called it hussem from the Russian gusskom, - was necessary because of the narrow roadways. Occasionally even 3 horses were harnessed, with the driver having to hold 6 reins in his hands. If the horse in front was well broken in, it ran free, i.e., without a lead, and was only steered by shouting. A long whip on a short handle hung from the driver's right side, which was usually held outside the sled, and dragged along. This way the driver could force the horses to obey if necessary. On such a ride, the faces of young and old beamed. At the front end of the sled poles, a hanger was clamped and sometimes fitted with small bells and jingles, which announced the vehicle already from afar. Those who wanted to add something extra also decorated the harnesses of the side horses with bells.

The government city of Orenburg became increasingly important for the settlement. It was 80 - 100 versts away from the settlement and could only be reached by a whole day's journey.

The town had a highly developed milling industry, 2 large plant oil factories and an important millet-peeling plants. The timber business was also very extensive, starting with only 2 sawmills in the beginning. In the time, however, this developed into huge business with a forest stock in the Ural Mountains of about 300,000 desjatines. The fur and pelt trade was also important and was largely in the hands of the Tatars, while the Sartars led an extensive trade in dried fruit from Tashkent. Large revenue was brought in through textile and iron goods trade and the sale of agricultural machinery, in which Mennonites (Neufeld, Isaak, Waldheim, Taurida) and other Germans were involved. The town's 2 breweries dominated the barley market. Of course, the owners were Germans. Additionally, 2 large brickworks, one of which belonged to a German, and a few lime kilns outside the town should be mentioned.

The city has long been a link between Eastern Europe and Central Asia and the seat of the government's authorities. Besides a richly endowed museum, it had a boys' and a girls' grammar school, a seminary, a secondary school for Kyrgyz, 2 cadet schools, etc. The governor and his deputy resided in the so-called “Caravanserai”, a park surrounded by a high wall. It housed a number of offices and authorities, as well as a beautiful mosque with a slender tower. The magnificent Byzantine-style cathedral has a typical Russia history: when the clergy decided to start building it, disagreements arose between them and the city fathers. Apparently the former complied and erected an image of a saint on the designated site, but every night the image moved to the spiritually chosen site. Finally, the city fathers surrendered to "God's will".

Outside the town was the “Mennovoj Dvor”, the exchange market. It played an important role in the life of the town. It was a massive building, surrounded by high brick walls, which were supposed to protect it from attacks. For many years, the products of Asia and Europe changed hands in this courtyard. Later, almost all trade was transferred to the city (Gostinnej Dvor), as goods could now be transported by rail. In the past, camel caravans used to transport goods to the East. The way led through long distances of barren land and borderless sand deserts. The caravans were on the road for weeks, because from Tashkent to Orenburg they had to cover no less than 1800 kilometres.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5 *Topography of the settlement*

The total area of the settlement is divided into 3 different terraces or plateaus sloping moderately towards the north. These are closed at their northern border by the Tchuran (Upper Uran), Uran and Gussicha massifs. The Tchuran terrace extends from the massif of the same name on the northern border of the settlement in a south-easterly direction almost as far as the Uran. It belongs entirely to the Chortitza people and includes the following villages: Chortitza (1), Petrovka (2), Kantserovka (3), Kamenka (4), Deyevka (5), Nikolayevka (6), Feodorovka (7), Romanovka (8), Dolinovka (9), Radnitchnoye (10) and Dobrovka (11). On the southern slope, close to the Uran, lies the leasehold village of Sabangul.

Following the Tchuran terrace, beginning on the left bank of the Uran River, the Uran Terrace stretches southwards. It tapers off in the west and almost reaches the Gussicha in the south. On it lie the villages of Kitchkas (12), Kubanka, Klubnikovo, Stepanovka, Aliessovo, Suvorovka (13) and Lyubimovka. On the left bank of the Gussicha, its northern border, the Gussicha Terrace begins with the following villages: Pretoria (14), Karaguy, Kamyshovoye, Chernoye Osero, Zelyonoye and Pogornoye.

These 3 steps, which, as I said, all slope down towards the north, are generally relatively steep on their southern side and are intersected here by short gorges and larger gullies formed by melt and rain water. The terraces themselves, on the other hand, have only a few and not deep gorges and valleys, other than Matka and Sepaya, the Tchuran terrace and Barsuk on the Gussicha terrace.

The roads and paths adapt to the terrain. When descending from the terraces to the south, they use the valleys of the southern slopes. In the east-west direction, the paths mostly follow the courses of the streams and creeks.

These creeks belong only partly to the settlement. The northern border of the settlement and the villages of Chortitza, Petrovka and Kamenka are located slightly south of the Tchuran. The other two rivers are the already mentioned Uran and Gussicha. The Gussicha flows through the southern part of the settlement in a north-westerly direction and forms numerous swamp holes with relatively deep pools. From the south the streams Chernoye Osero, Karaguy (Bashkir kara-black) and Barsuk, Tchashchlan (Barsuk-Badger) flow in. The Barsuk valley, by the way, has only a few springs in its lower part, northern side of the Gussicha its right bank also no springs worth mentioning.

About 10 versts north of the Gussicha, the Uran River crosses the central part of this area in a strong westerly direction. It carries less water because it lacks inflowing streams from the south side. It is also significantly shorter than the other two (the Tchuran and the Gussicha). Only one stream on the northern side, the Sepaya, flows into it. It begins at Radnitchnoye, but belongs to Dolinovka.

The Matka (Little Mother) as well as the Sepaya II flow into the Tchuran or Upper Uran between Kamenka and Petrovka. The Matka forms the boundary between the Kamenka and Petrovka village squares and carries water up to its mouth. It is, by the way, the widest and deepest ravine on the settlement and is particularly thick with bushes.

On the frequent trips to Orenburg, the watershed between the Volga and Ural rivers must be crossed. It is formed by the Obshchij Sert, southern foothills of the Ural Mountains. The ascent is slow, not very steep, but long. If the carter is an animal lover, he dismounts and walks alongside his cart. He spurs his horses on with words, sometimes also with a lead and whip. At suitable places the horses are given an opportunity to catch their breath. The frequency of these rests depends entirely on the condition of the horses and the weight of the freight. Finally, however,

one is at the top. A wide view into the distance opens up here on a clear day. In the distance, Orenburg with its church towers can be distinguished on the far-away hazy horizon. But it is still at least 50 versts to the city.

But then it's downhill all the way to Repino, and finally at a brisk trot. Here, in the Cossack village, there is usually a break for food.

The wagons of the colonists lack braking devices, and the use of the shoe is not common. The horses must therefore stop the wagon with their necks. Sometimes, however, they cannot or do not want to brake the heavy wagon, and if the driver then does not have the presence of mind to steer it onto softer ground - road graves are unknown on these natural roads - a catastrophe is inevitable

In the early years on the way to Orenburg, many swampy areas had to be passed. These were a real hardship for the settlers, because their wagons are stable but had rather narrow rims. Sometimes they managed to pass such a place with a running start, but often the wagon got stuck in the middle of the swamp. It's good thing if the driver has company. Then a second team is brought forward, and with pulling, pushing and shouting, the wagon gets going again.

Although nothing is ever done to the roads themselves, these swamp holes have been either bridged or drained over time. In this way, the difficulties of travel have been significantly reduced. In the settled area, road conditions were much better, though by no means exemplary.

But people and animals were always happy when, after a day-long absence the home village came into sight and the journey had concluded without accident or loss.

The soil is very diverse in the area of the settlement. Beside fertile black earth, there is stony, loamy, sandy and even saltpetre soil. Therefore, the harvest results are very different not only within the settlement, but also within one and the same village, or even on a single farm.

6 *Animal and bird life*

Of the predators, only the wolf, the jackal and the fox live in the settlement. Much further north, in the large forests, the bear can also be found, but it has never come down to the settlement. To reduce the danger of the wolves, especially on the lonely sled rides, wolf hunts were organised by the whole settlement from time to time in the first years. Armed with pitchforks and axes, rarely with a rifle, they went out and surrounded the large, overgrown valleys of Barsuk, Sepaya II and Matka. In the process, a few wolves were always hunted down. As the settlement became more and more densely populated, the wolves retreated to the more distant forests, so that before World War I, wolves were rarely seen in the settlement area. After the war, however, they began to multiply and spread again. The owning of hunting weapons was forbidden to the civilian population, and hunting expeditions were no longer organised.

The fox can be encountered here and there, but hardly ever causes any damage among the feathered fowl. Badgers and polecats are equally harmless, as is the marmot, the bajbak. Its fur is coveted as lining, which led to the gradual extinction of this phlegmatic and cute inhabitant of the steppes.

On the other hand, the damage caused by the countless large field or gopher mice, the sussliki, on the fields is often very great. They become a real plague in dry years. In order to fight them, their extermination is planned. Every farmer is obliged to kill so and so many field mice, and the feet to be handed in the schoolmaster's office as corpus delicti. Countless barrels of water had to be brought out into the fields to "drown out" the pests. Nitrogen and various traps were also used.

The hare is common on the settlement, but not very popular. It is hunted with traps and shotguns, mainly because it gnaws the bark of the few fruit trees in winter. With its white fur it is difficult to spot in the snow, but there are so many of them that a good hunter never returns home without rich prey.

The hedgehog, although rare, is seen as a friend and is protected and spared.

Much richer than the world of animals is the bird life on the settlement, and it is surprising that were few birders on the large settlement. High in the skies the eagle circles, sometimes diving straight down to get a snake. Snakes are common, with the most venomous being the adder. Goshawks not infrequently wreak havoc among the young fowl. Ravens, crows and magpies also nested in the shrubbery of the lower valleys. Of course, the sparrow was not lacking in the company.

The hunter only had to choose what he wanted to bring home; partridges, steppe- or black grouse were on offer, and the quail grew astonishingly fat in autumn, also ran right in front of the shotgun. Wild geese often flew in a vee over the settlement, while wild ducks liked to breed in the reeds on the river banks. From time to time, even swans on their journey to the south or north stopped at the settlement, especially also the great bustards. On the other hand, storks and herons were seldom to be seen. The crane, however, is common in some years.

Among the songbirds, the lark takes first place, and the Orenburg farmer unforgettably remembered its song when he went out into the field in spring to cultivate his land. At the back of his long trough wagon stood the bulbous barrel of water covered with a sack, next to which lay the harrows. The farmer with his sons sat on a sack of chaff or simply on a seat while the filled, usually red food box stood in front of them. Then they did not talk much. But they all experienced the hour intensely, if mostly unconsciously. The long and oppressive winter was over, and the sun was shining bright and warm again. And above it all, the little brown lark sang its song.

The swallow is not missing from the picture either, although it is by no means very common, nor are the titmouse, the colourful finch and the starling. The nightingale, on the other hand, is rarely heard up there.

The three rivers of the settlement carry a few valuable species of fish. Trout are completely absent, whereas perch, whitefish, plugs and pike are netted or hooked.

The world of insects is very rich in Orenburg, but species harmful or troublesome to humans are hardly found there. Grasshoppers rarely appeared on the settlement, but they sometimes did quite a lot of harm. Mosquitoes only inhabited the marshy areas, while caterpillars sometimes caused serious damage in the gardens.

The plant world in Orenburg is extremely abundant, and the enthusiast and botanist could not miss any of the well-known field flowers or grasses. In spring, fields are widely covered not only with the yellow so-called buttercups (no dandelions), but soon entire valleys are covered the wonderfully fragrant violets, with forget-me-nots, with innumerable blue, white and lilac furry flowers, with blue, yellow and white lilies and here and there even with yellow and red tulips!

A German prisoner of war, a botanist, collected more than 200 different medicinal herbs in the area of the settlement in 1915 – 1917.

II A settlement is emerging

7 The Chortitza settlement

A number of the re-settlers waiting in Pokrovskoye found the wait too long and set off in groups towards the settlement. They had been able to buy horses and sleds in the Russian village. When they arrived at the settlement, they settled into the former estate houses. Now they could make preparations for the sowing and also for the construction of the emergency huts on their spots.

There were four such estate houses in the area of the settlement, three of which were in Chortitza territory. They were called Sabangul, Sepay and Uran. The latter was situated where later Dobrovka was built, Sepay near Kantserovka (originally called Sepay) and Sabangul at the Sabangul stream near the later village of the same name. On the Molotschna land lay the so-called Savod (factory), a former distillery on the Gussicha River north of Chernoye Osero. These buildings were of great value as emergency accommodations in the beginning.

All the usable buildings on Sabangul and Sepay were prepared as mass hostels and filled to bursting. Fortunately, the time the settlers had to spend here was not very long; for in the torturous confinement, disagreements and squabbles were inevitable.

As soon as the thaw had disappeared and the roads were passable, the families who had stayed behind in Pokrovskoye, and that was the majority, set off for the settlement. The adventurous journey to the settlement was full of incidents and did not raise their spirits, even though their expectations had been greatly lowered in the meantime. Countless swamp holes and small rivulets had to be crossed on the way. There were no bridges (except at the "big" Shikhbalov estate across the Kuva river). Therefore, it was difficult to cross the rivers. They were still in flood stages, and the banks were a quagmire. But without any loss of people or animals, everyone reached the settlement.

Peter Harder, Deyevka, talks about his journey from Ukraine to Orenburg: "From Gnadental (Baratov) to Deyevka including the stay in Pokrovskoye, took two and a half months. Our group consisted of only 3 families. Upon arrived at our spot, we pitched our tent. The other families put their harrows upright against each other, covered them with straw, and the first shelter was ready.

Soon the settlers had wood brought from Mileus, 120 versts away, or from Scharlek, 60 versts away, and the construction of the first houses began. Most of the walls of the dwellings and the stables were made either of clay or of air-dried bricks (the so-called Patzen, from the Polish pazcyna), some of sandstone, but rarely. The barns, however, were built of wood and were added later. Fortunately, both the wood and the wages were cheap.

It was difficult to prepare the planks, boards and beams to size because there was a lack of suitable tools. Boards were usually made with very inadequate tools. There were no sawmills nearby. Many settlers first built cellar-like grass and mud huts (Semlin - German) from the Russian semlyanki).

Fortunately, the 5-8 m deep wells generally held good drinking water, and only rarely did a well have to be sealed because the water tasted like saltpeter (nitre). Kantserovka and Nikolayevka were the worst off in this respect, but there were also some wells with good water.

This extremely primitive and difficult beginning discouraged some families so much that they returned to their old homeland at the first opportunity. The vast majority, however, stayed and bravely strove forward. Fortunately, no one had time to dwell on their misery, work was waiting for everyone's hands. Above all, they had to build. The summer here was short, far too

short, and the winter very long, as they had all experienced in Pokrovskoye. Immediately the plots of land on the village plan were raffled off and their boundaries were marked.

To postpone the cultivation of the fields would mean to dig out the water for oneself or to block one's way. The fair distribution of the little ploughable lands available caused no small amounts of headaches. It was also disastrous when someone's horses were stolen at night. That unfortunately happened repeatedly. Russians and especially the Bashkirs saw this as a good opportunity to enrich themselves off these defenceless people. Lockable stables did not yet exist, and even dogs were rare here. The farmer himself slept so soundly after the day's exertions that he could have been carried away himself.

The women and children also had their hands full. The small children were dependent on care but, the hut had to be furnished, a vegetable garden had to be arranged, poultry had to be procured, and so on. Sometimes one would touch one's own head to make sure that it was still there.

Some of the pioneers wanted to almost collapse under the burden of the tasks that could not be postponed. Those who had not yet learned to pray, learned it here. And they never prayed in vain. God opened up inner resources, resources whose existence they had had little idea of until then.

Where individuals could not do it alone, they proceeded together. Those who had brought some money with them were able to build their houses out of earth bricks or even sandstone. Some were also able to have the heaviest work done by Bashkirs or Russians. They worked very cheaply, though not entirely for free. And money was extremely tight. The luckiest home owners often made their rooms available for consultations, church services and school lessons.

There was a lack of everything. Wherever possible, the completely penniless tried to earn something from the more fortunate. Necessity brought the individuals closer together. Nevertheless, there was no lack of internal difficulties. The village Schulze, church leaders and preachers could have sung songs about this. It was just a society welded together from different villages and settlements, which were to form a community here. For example: former Schoenhorst residents wanted everything arranged exactly as it had been in their old home, and the Osterwick residents were convinced that everything was wrong if it wasn't exactly according to their plans and views. Fortunately, there was no lack of prudent men who could steer and influence without much noise, and so here too, over the years, the relatively uniform type - the Mennonite farmer - was established.

Even if persistent diligence succeeded in overcoming the first difficulties, the new settlers were still far from being out of the woods. The difficulties loomed mountainous before the individual and before the entire group. A whole host of urgent questions were constantly waiting to answered: care for the sick, medical provisions, schools, teachers, church services, etc. Young people announced their intention to marry to the preachers. Even the first baptism classes had to be thought of. But all these difficulties, worries and experiences eventually became a blessing for most of them, because hardship teaches us to pray.

This is how the villages came into being:

1894: Chortitza, Petrovka, Kantserovka, Kamenka, Deyevka.

1895: Nikolayevka and half of Romanovka.

1897: Feodorovka and the second half of Romanovka.

The settlement of Orenburg has never had an official name. Sometimes it was called Deyev, sometimes Orenburg Settlement, while the Russians called it Deyevski Utchastok. After the reorganization 1917 it was called: Uran Volost (i.e., Uran district).

The settlement of the other available village sites then came to a halt for several years. The reason for this interruption was probably that in the south, lack of interest in the settlement of Orenburg had declined considerably. Progress there was so extraordinarily slow that people began to doubt that the settlement would grow. Incidentally, the settlers had never been tested for their suitability as pioneer farmers. Those who came forward were accepted if they could prove that they were landless.

The mother colonies could have contributed a great deal to a faster development of the settlement by granting loans at moderate interest rates. Now, however, people in the Ukraine had the impression that the settlement was stuck in its initial difficulties. This seemed to be proved by the fact that after one or more years some new settlers sold their farms for a pittance, packed up their belongings, borrowed money from their relatives in the South and returned there. These disappointed people then left the abandoned settlement dissatisfied.

As a result of this return migration, uncertainty about settlement greatly increased, not only in the south but also in the settlement itself. Some people in Orenburg felt that they had been abandoned in a hopeless situation. In the South, the idea of dissolving the settlement and returning the settlers to the South or resettling them elsewhere was occasionally considered. It is understandable that the two sides unleashed their displeasure on the commissions that had bought the land in the first place. As often happens in such cases, there was no lack of justifiable suspicions. Whether justified or not shall remain undiscussed here. But the vast majority of the settlers, despite all the difficulties, had to endure here, even if it was against their will. And it was they who finally overcame the infinitely difficult beginning and proved that the settlement was viable. The full significance of serious climatic inadequacies and also the poor quality of a large part of the land could not be recognised in those first years.

The village land was by no means always one unit. Often the land was 5 or more versts away from the village. Early farms consisted of 40, 60 and 80 desjatines. The first 8 Chortitza villages and the first 6 Molotschna villages had only 40 desjatines of land. On the other hand, the later added Chortitza villages received 60 desjatines each, and the 2 free-hold villages of Aliessovo and Karaguy had 80 desjatines per farm. Later, the landholders in Feodorovka and Romanovka also received 20 desjatines each from the leasehold declaration so that here too, each farm now had 60 desjatines.

Because the quality of the land was very different, it was divided into larger sections and then into as many plots as the village had farms. Distance from the village was also taken into consideration so that no one would be at a disadvantage. Each village had its pasture as one allotted piece. The cattle of the whole village were pastured together. The mountainous or very hilly land, here they called them mountains, was taken as pasture. It was less suitable for agriculture anyway. At night the animals - horses and cattle were kept together in a herd - were brought to the village. While the horses were only driven into the pen (low German - Hock), the cattle came to the farm and were staked outside. After the farmers had verified their horses in the pen and checked if any was amiss, the tabun (term for a herd of horses) was also taken out to pasture for the night. In the morning he was back in the village to take out the animals needed for work.

The shepherds were mostly Bashkirs, rarely Russians and almost never Germans. Only desperation would force a German to offer himself as a shepherd somewhere. But thereby he had also reached the lowest social level and hardly counted in Mennonite society. To live in a primitive shepherd's dwellings was considered a disgrace. The shepherd’s work had to be supervised by a shepherd supervisor.

8 *"He who does not sow, will not reap."*

Among all the difficult problems that could not be postponed, the first sowing was probably the most urgent. For he who does not sow, cannot reap. Most of the land was still primeval meadow, and this resisted the attack of the newly developed farmers especially, since their physical powers and their farming equipment were ill suited for such a task. Only the ploughland taken over from the Deyevkas was easier to work, but unfortunately there was far too little of it. The Russians called this land "soft land". If there was no plough-land in the village, as in Deyevka, for example, the lease-land was used. But since such land was not always near the village, its cultivation, due to the distance, was a great burden.

Jacob Giesbrecht, formerly of Petrovka, tells us that his parents sowed 11 desjatines with great difficulty in the first year. However, they were only able to thresh and bring in 5 desjatines by the skin of their teeth, because the winter came upon them. During the late threshing, a snowstorm started, which created up to man-sized drifts. This family was the first in the village to finish building their house and could now make it available to the congregation for worship meetings.

David Lepp, Deyevka, tells us that the first summer was very rainy and that it rained continuously during the threshing season. For the wet wheat they were offered only 10 kopecks per pud [pud – approx. 16.38 kg]. The wheat market in Pokrovskoye was hardly worthy of the name.

Johann P. Schmidt, Kamenka, reports: "My parents came to Orenburg in 1894. I was 16 years old at the time. We had already lived for some time in the Samara district on the Pleshanovo settlement. It was about 80 versts from Kamenka. Father went to the Orenburg settlement in the spring and requested 10 desjatines of land. He sowed 5 desjatines with wheat that had been cut in the winter. But this wheat did not germinate, and my father had worked 5 desjatines in vain.

Gradually, sowing machines were also acquired.

In May, father brought us all to Orenburg. We came to the Sepay estate. In the same year, the village of Kantserovka was also settled. The residential buildings on the estate, which we called Chutor in Russian, were already full when we arrived, and we had to make ourselves at home in an attic. We shared it with another family. The mice and rats obviously did not like the fact that we restricted their rights. It was not uncommon for them to run over us at night, which caused a lot of commotion. We had already moved to Kamenka when one of the mothers' sleep

was disturbed many times during the night because one of her children kept crying out in pain. In the morning it turned out a rat had gnawed the child's toes.

Father and I immediately got a job with the land surveyor Joseph Friesen in Deyevka. He had taken on the task of surveying the village plans. This gave us a living and we were also able to buy a horse. But we were still very poor. At the end of May we moved to Kamenka. My sister, who had been bedridden for 2 years, died here on 7 June and was the first to be buried in the Kamenka cemetery. We did not have any preachers yet and I remember how my dear parents were worried about who would deliver the funeral sermon. They then invited a teacher, named Olfert, to give a speech. The Brethren congregation probably already had preachers at that time, but the “fence” between the 2 congregations was so high that my father did not dare to ask a preacher from the Brethren congregation for such a service.

In the second year, preachers had already been elected. For the first 2 years, the eldest of the Mennonite community was brought from the settlement of Pleshanovo to perform the holy baptism. Therefore, the baptism lessons had to be held very early in the year in order that the elder could come to us on the sled. As far as I remember, Preacher Abram Penner, Deyevka, was elected elder of the Mennonite congregation in 1899.

The Brethren congregation already had preachers in 1896. In 1899, at the request of the congregation and on the recommendation of the mission committee, preacher Kornelius Fehr came to Orenburg. He served the Kamenka congregation for 1 year as the leading preacher and was then ordained as an Aeltester.

About half of the Kamenka settlers had brought some provisions with them, which also benefited the other half. At that time, I worked for 25 kopecks a day. When I received 18 rubles a month during the threshing period in the second year, it was an exception, because generally the monthly wage did not exceed 15 rubles.

Our first harvest was only mediocre. Moreover, the harvesting machines were still a rarity. The harvesting was therefore protracted. When we were finished with the cutting, rain set in, which soon turned into snow and frost. This caused the unbound grain heaps in the field to freeze together. We then gathered half of the grain into a heap on the field. The rest we drove to the farm. Of course, the grain was too wet for flailing. Fortunately, rye had already been sown on our land by the former owner. This was distributed among the families so that everyone had something to eat. Father mowed the rye with a scythe, and mother and I tied it into sheaves. Then we flailed it over the barrel. The straw was tied into small bundles and used as roofing.

Fortunately, there were plenty of potatoes in the first year. They only cost 6 to 10 kopecks per pud. When the cold winter set in, we were able to thresh. The grain was not dry, but it was very hard from the frost. It had to be over 20 degrees R [the *Réaumur* scale], otherwise the grain would not be hard enough. In our village there was only one threshing machine. It belonged to Martin Neufeld. In order to be able to thresh at all, we got three or four landlords together and threshed their grain, one after the other.

Our food consisted almost exclusively of rye bread and potatoes. As a result, the men were only weak and could not hold out until the evening without a snack. But since even the snack consisted mainly of dry bread and prips [coffee substitute], large portions had to be eaten in order to be able to work all day. As soon as the frost eased, we had to stop threshing, otherwise too much wheat would remain in the straw.

Of course, this wheat was too moist for the mill. So, we tried to dry it on the stove. But that was much too slow. Then the Russians from the neighbouring villages of Nikolskoye and Novo Spasskoye offered to dry it on their big ovens. These ovens were indeed big and served as sleeping places in winter. But the little children stayed up there during the day, and it was not

uncommon for the half-dried wheat to be moistened again. So, we preferred to bring it home again. In spring we were finally able to dry and thresh the grain that had remained in the fields. Many mice had nested in the field heaps and had contaminated the wheat. As a result, the grain had taken on a very unpleasant smell. Despite great efforts, all attempts at cleaning were unsuccessful. We were not able to remove the mouse droppings. But necessity breaks iron. Someone discovered an excellent and very simple cleaning method - with water. They took a barrel half-filled with water and poured the contaminated wheat into it. It immediately sank to the bottom, while the dirt floated on top and could be skimmed off. During this procedure the wheat also lost its bad smell. Now it was dried in the sun and could be processed into edible flour.

As there was little ploughland on our village plan, many of our settlers rented land on the leasehold in the second year. This land had already been ploughed by the previous owner. Those who had no horses leased their unbroken land to Russian large-scale farmers. If it was leased for 3 years, the owner was allowed to occupy a third of the broken land first year and half in the second and third year.

The small Russian water mills could only produce meal. But our women also needed white flour. Then we learned that large steam mills were working in the city of Orenburg and that one could also borrow flour from the Oberlaender company. However, the whole village community would have to vouch for it. So then in autumn flour was bought for the whole year on credit.

But borrowing was worrisome. When the payment deadline came, 4 to 5 puds of wheat had to be sold to pay for 1 pud of white flour.

Many settlers also had to buy their seed wheat on credit for 1.30 to 1.60 rubles per pud. In the autumn however, they themselves only received 50 to 60 kopecks at the most per pud and this in Pokrovskoye,70 versts away. This circumstance greatly hindered the progress of the settlers in first years.

So, we struggled through until 1898. In that year Heinrich Esau was elected as Schulze. He had been a poverty-relief officer in the Mennonite Brethren community but as Schulze he became the poverty-relief officer for the whole village. He took it upon himself to help all the villagers in word and deed without distinction. Thus, he succeeded in buying seed wheat and seed oats for the coming spring half as cheaply as we had been able to before. He also no longer bought flour from the Oberlaender company in Orenburg, but from the Mennonite Wall company in Pleshanovo, and at a much lower price. From this time on, things gradually became easier in Kamenka and the farmers made gentle progress.

9 *The Molotschna Plan*

The difficulties of the villages of Kubanka, Klubnikovo, Stepanovka, Aliessovo (freeholders), Karaguy (freeholders; kara-Tatar = black), Kamyshovoye (Russ. - Kamesch - reed), Chernoye Osero (Russian: tschernoje osero-black lake) and 2 years later Zelyonoye established on the Molotschna plan in 1895 were no less than those of their Chortitza neighbours. For many, the beginning was almost unbearably difficult. It is true that people settled in the seven villages at the same time, but only a few families actually began to work there. Most of them took a wait-and-see attitude. They stayed where they had been. These landless had already been released, both from their village and their homestead, in the old homeland.

In Stepanovka, for example, only 5 families were settled in the first year, of which, incidentally, 1 consisted of only 1 person. That was one seventh of the village. The first to die here was the wife of a H(einrich?) Loewen. She was soon followed by 2 children, who were carried off by the smallpox. Many others recovered from this disease and but kept the scars for the rest of their lives.

The arable acreage was small and the preparation of the soil insufficient. Here, too, there was a lack of strength and suitable farming equipment. An early autumn had a very negative effect on the harvest. The government sold rye to the new settlers on credit, but the rye was of poor quality. In addition, it was heavily contaminated by mice, so that it could only be used for food purposes in extreme emergencies. How easily the mother settlements could have remedied this if there had been good will and understanding.

"Later, money was borrowed from our former brethren in Ukraine.... " writes Peter Riesen, Stepanovka.

Daniel Hoppe reports about Klubnikovo: "My father was the son of a small-holder and my mother was a foster daughter. Both came from very poor backgrounds. In March 1895 my parents left their old home with 3 small children. The 4th-class journey took a long time. But finally, our destination Platovka was reached. Unfortunately, we had come during the thaw and the roads were very bad. My father hired a Russian with a tjelega. The little rivers were still full of water and mud. We therefore made very slow progress and only after overcoming great difficulties. The parents walked almost the whole distance. If we got stuck, we had to carry our things on our backs over the difficult parts. Again and again, they got wet. The experiences on that journey have remained unforgotten in our family. Years later they were still a source of conversation. Finally, "our" village Klubnikovo came into view.

When we arrived, however, there were only 3 or 4 earth huts made of meadow sod to be seen. They consisted of a hole dug in the ground with a roof made of primitive planks, covered with shrubbery and meadow sod. When the parents saw all this, they wept almost inconsolably. Life in these conditions seemed impossible to them. But they had to stay there. A return to the old home was out of the question due to lack of money. My parents still had 30 rubles at that time. (Widow Isaak still had 10 rubles when she reached the settlement with her poor children. And with this money she had to buy flour immediately!).

There was a lot of shrubbery and wormwood growing on our farm site. But our arrival was in spring, and that was very good. Soon things sprouted and blossomed everywhere, and in a single week our whole area was beautifully green.

At that time, there were still many fish and crabs in our little river Uran. In a single hour you could catch a whole bucketful of these creatures. That made for many satiating meals. Many birds of all kinds also populated the river banks, especially wild ducks whose eggs we searched for to be eaten.

One day, when my parents were very worried, a Russian came to us. He lived in the neighbouring village about 12 versts away and wanted to rent land. "You don't even have a house," he said, "or a horse. How are you going to sow?" – “God only knows," my father said. The Russian replied: "I'll sell you a horse and I'll also sow a desjatine of wheat for you. Of course, my father jumped at the chance. What else could he do? At least we had a start. Later, this Russian brought us some more boards for the roof. Only when the roof on our little house was finished did my father start looking for a job. He found it in Aliessovo, which was about 9 versts away. Aliessovo was a free-holder village. Most of these settlers had been able to bring some means with them. Here they were able to build better and above all, larger houses. They were roofed with cane and reed. And my father knew how to roof with this material. Unfortunately, the daily wage was very low. In addition, my father had to, walk the long distance twice a day, because there was seldom an opportunity to get a ride. Mother, however, was afraid to spend the night alone with us small children in this wild region. Luckily my father was a good walker. Often, however, my parents were almost ready to give up. But then came the summer.

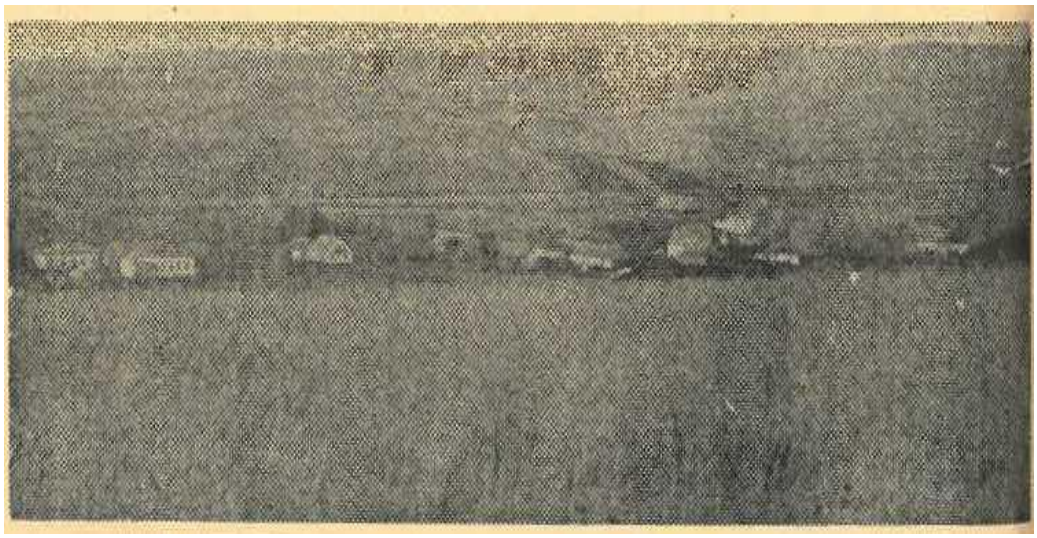
The village of Kamyshovoye

Again, our situation became a little easier. There were a lot of strawberries growing nearby [Russ. - klubnika - giant strawberries]. If someone drove over such a strawberry field, the wheels became wet from the crushed fruit. They had a very special flavour. The blossoming meadows and the abundance of hay were sometimes a joy to us. Fortunately, the harvest was also very good in our first year of settlement. From the 1 desjatine we had been able to sow, we harvested 120 puds! That was a record harvest and gave us a lot of courage. At least we had our own bread. And if the harvests would continue to be so good, we could soon prosper.

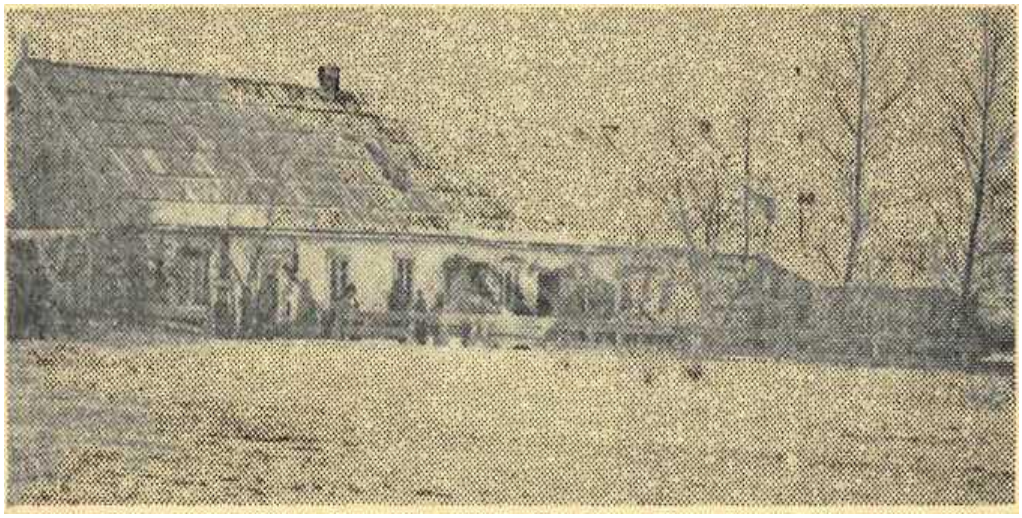
Gradually, more settlers came to Klubnikovo. But they were all poor. That was also the real reason why Klubnikovo took so long to start developing.

Brother Schmidt says: "In 1898 our Kamenka choir was invited to Klubnikovo for the thanksgiving celebration. That community was also very poor. Therefore, not all the guests could be fed. Only the singers and the preachers living further away were invited for lunch. The very hospitable Hoppe family had invited quite a few guests to their home. As there were not enough plates, the potatoes were eaten directly from the pan, and when were not enough forks available, one ate with the spoon. The coffee was, of course, a local product. And the cakes? - one might have seen them in one's dreams. But we were grateful for "bread and fish", as Jesus had taught us.

Peter Barg recounts his first impressions of the new settlement: "We arrived in Orenburg in the spring of 1902. I was 13 years old at the time. The hour of our arrival will remain unforgettable to me. When we reached our destination, we saw a "village" with 30 "houses" in front of us. Most of them were earthen huts, even covered with earth. Neither tree nor bush to be seen all around. My father immediately started planting. The poplar thrived extremely well. He planted hedges around his plot and also created a 'forest' at its lower end."



The village of Klubnikovo



Bergmann's homestead in Kubanka

10 *Uncomfortable neighbourhood*

A poor man always has the wind against him, says a Low German proverb. The first settlers in Orenburg saw this confirmed every day in their life. The first summer was, as I said, extremely rainy, and the winter began much too early for these new settlers. As a result of the inadequate food and the unhealthy accommodation, diseases soon broke out and many children succumbed.

The behaviour of some of their neighbours, the Bashkirs, was also a heavy burden for them in the first years. The concepts of ownership of these Mohammedans differed greatly from those of their German neighbours. Bashkirs are great horse lovers, and they saw this as a good opportunity to acquire horses cheaply, which they could either resell at a good profit or use in their annual spring races.

Again, and again horses disappeared in the villages at night. The horse, however, was even more precious and indispensable to the new farmer than it was to the Bashkir. Among the virtues of the Bashkirs, diligence did not take first place. Soon the Bashkirs found out that stealing from the Germans involved very little risk. So, they became more and more impudent.

It didn't help that the Germans employed a Bashkir as an Otwetshik, as someone responsible on behalf of his people. He had the task of watching over the long, work-unaccustomed fingers of his comrades, of investigating stolen horses, or at least supporting the investigation. Probably in most cases this "responsible person" was in cahoots with the thieves, and if he actually brought back one of the stolen horses, he naturally expected a corresponding reward.

David Lepp, Deyevka, writes about these thefts: "J. Krahn, Chortitza, hitches his horses to the wagon wheels outside and lays down under the wagon for the night. Now let the thieves come! And they come. The situation is not hard to imagine. The German has worked hard during the day and is certainly dead tired. The Bashkirs, on the other hand, are well rested. So, all they have to do is wait until the "Niemze" have fallen asleep. And the Bashkirs have plenty of time and patience. Soon they will hear regular snoring under the wagon. Now then. They steal his horses after they have taken wheels from the wagon under which the farmer is sleeping and then free the horses from the wheels some distance away.

My neighbour in Deyevka, Abram Falk, is working in the garden one day. His wife has put the table outside in front of the hut because it is so damp inside. Their 4 horses are grazing nearby. Two riders are approach. And when these sons of the steppes see a beautiful horse, their mouths water, quite literally, because for them horse meat is one of the most desired delicacies. Then the woman calls out to her husband, "Hey, they are coming towards us!" And they see how the strangers quickly approach their horses, loosen the lead rope with astonishing dexterity and just as quickly disappear again with their "acquisition". And all this in broad daylight. Search? Pursue? Useless! No one will ever catch up with them again.

Finally, the colonists turn to the government help and protection. And, the government gives them a rare but wise advice: "Come to an agreement with the robbers. Get in touch with the leaders of the gang and make a treaty with them." This seemed a bit strange to us, but if you live among wolves, you should howl with them. And so, we went to see the horse thieves, paid the leader a bribe and made a "non-aggression pact" for a year. And lo and behold, no one stole a horse from us again that year. But those of us who still had some money did not like this way of protecting their property and when they went back to Ukraine, where their reports will certainly did not help our credulity .... "

Johann Peter Schmidt, Kamenka, reports on this subject: "The many horse thefts were another obstacle to our economic advancement. For our neighbours, the Bashkirs, stealing was not a sin. The ‘responsible person’ we hired was himself one of the worst thieves. He was supposed to either return the stolen goods or pay for it. Many of our people had nothing to do with this arrangement because it seemed unbiblical to them. The contract with the person responsible was even confirmed by the Russian authorities. Soon we found out - having become wise by experience - that it was wrong to make any payments in advance to this rascal or even to give him an "advance". Once he had the money, we were rid of it, and he himself would not lift a finger. During the winter months it was better to have 4 men on guard on the street at night. Very often the thieves were chased away by this guard, but it was seldom possible to catch them. If one was caught, the beating he had to take was certainly gladly administered. The frequency of thieves' thefts was hardly reduced by this. It was only when 4 thieves were caught in Zelyonoye and handed over to the police, did they become less adventurous.

In the winter of 1896, I and my neighbour Dietrich Reimer were on night watch. We did not walk along the village street, but stayed in shadows of the houses. When we reached Isaak Driediger’s, we could see the small shepherd's hut. There we see a man lying in a snow hollow. A hunter? The moon is shining very brightly, and this visibility would be excellent for the hunter. But when the hunter notices us, he jumps up and runs away over the high snowdrift. Then we see a cart with 2 horses coming out; I quickly run onto the road and manage to cut off the carriage and stop it. I have to put up with a good shove from the femer rod. I ask them what they are looking for and where they are going. One of them says, "We thought the shepherd still lived there in that little house and we wanted to spend the night with him. I replied, "Then I will find you a place for the night.”

But the night travellers refuse. They would rather drive to the next village and spend the night there. Well, unfortunately we had to let them go, because we had no proof that they had wanted to steal. But when they arrived at the end of the village and turned right instead of left, as they had said they would, we woke up our Schulze. “Oh," he says sleepily, "if they've already gone, let them drive." But this experience worried me, and I said to Regier: "Come on, I'll hitch up, let's drive over the mountain and see where they have gone. It was only a short climb, and when we reached the top, we saw the strangers running towards their sled. But we are not able to cut them off. Their lead is too big.

Now we head for Deyevka. About a verst before the village the snow cover is bit thinner, I loosen the reins and encourage my White a bit. And I manage to overtake the strangers. In a short time, we reach the Schulze Johann Wolf in Romanovka. He is quickly woken. I hurry onto the road to intercept the suspicious company once more. But they already turn into the middle road from Deyevka to Feodorovka.

The Schulze tells us: "By the time I've hitched up, God knows where they'll be. I ask Regier: "Are you cold?" "Why? What are you up to?" he asks.

“Well, this night the Bashkirs shall not have the opportunity to carry out their plan" I reply. And we continue towards Feodorovka. When we reach the wide, straight village street, we can see the same vehicle again. Then we see that 2 people are already working on one of the flat stable roofs. But when they see us, they quickly jump down. And the pursuit continues. We keep an eye on them until we reach Nikolayevka, then we turn homewards. From here it was only 6 versts to home. Only now we were entering our village from the other end.... "

When we recount our night's adventure the next morning, we are ridiculed on top of everything. But then in the morning we hear that Peter Hiebert in Feodorovka has found that his flat stable roof was torn open. Apparently, someone had tried to break into his stable. But his

horses are in the stable. "God did not allow it," he said. This incident comes to the ears of Mayor Wolf. He investigates the events of that night, and now we are suddenly publicly praised for our dutiful guarding. Yes, we even receive a public recommendation from colony."

One year later - in 1897 - I was woken up one night by Franz Giesbrecht and Jakob Toews: "Johann, get up, there was a thief at your place but he ran away. Take good care! We have to move on." They go to the middle of the village, here they meet the guards from the other end of the village and all 4 of them come to us. They lie down on the straw and 2 of them soon fell asleep. Not long afterwards, old Goetz's dogs start the alarm. They don't strike without reason. So up! All 4 guards run into the street, and I see to it that I get to my stable as quickly as possible. Above all, I want to get my hands on some kind of weapon. Then I walk along the houses. First, I come to Uncle Goetz's barn. They were both sleeping on the wheat heap. "Is anyone there?" he asks. I answer. The old man says: "There must be something going on in the village."

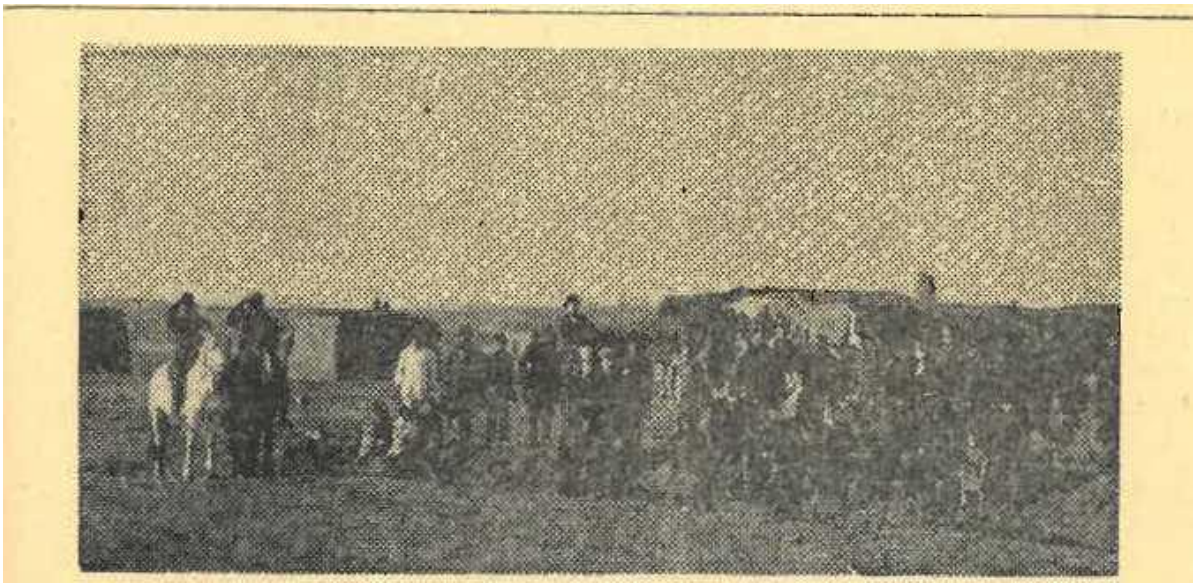
I hurry on and reach Abram Klassen's place. Here I suddenly see a man hugging the wall. With one leap he jumps around the corner and runs away. I hear him shout something else, and a second man jumps through the gable window. Two more follow him. I stand with my stick and wait to see if any more will jump out. But no more come. So, I go after them. Soon I catch up with them. One of them obviously can't run well. We are already at the ditch behind the property. He attempts to jump but falls into the ditch. Almost at the same time I cross over and stand in front of him with my weapon. I wait until he gets up. As his co-conspirators see that I am alone, they rush to help him. But I remain standing. Then our 4 men, the guards, also appear. Jakob Neufeld even has a rifle, but he cannot shoot because I am in the field of fire. The robbers turn back, soon reach a hollow with a bush and have disappeared.

When I'm calmer, I ask myself why I didn't strike. I was not afraid, nor did I think at the moment that I could have killed the man with my heavy weapon, or that my behaviour could be wrong. But the Lord had held his arm over me and I thanked God for his protection.

Some were surprised at my actions, as it was known that I was neither weak nor timid. One of my neighbours laughed especially loudly and said: "If I had had such an opportunity as you, then I would have....".

And such an opportunity was to come for him too, albeit a year later. We had to issue a fire watch. Isaak Regier had taken it over. When the night watchman, in the early hours of the night, was just opposite the yard of this combative neighbour, he sees a horseman in the yard of Hermann Neufeld. He hurries to the neighbour, his namesake, and wakes him. In no time he is ready. He quickly grabs his hat, puts on his rubber shoes and slips into a coat. He hurries across the road. The rider already sees him. A shout and 2 more people come out of the barn. One grabs the saddle horn, the other the horse's tail, and off they go. Regier follows them to the back of the garden.

When the robbers see that Regier is alone, one of them lets go of the horse and turns on him. In the moonlight, our friend realises that his opponent has a weapon in his hand. He quickly turns back and screams in fear so loudly that many in the village are startled out of their sleep. Since that time, he has been a little more reticent regarding any conversation about the pursuit of thieves.... "



A Bashkir village

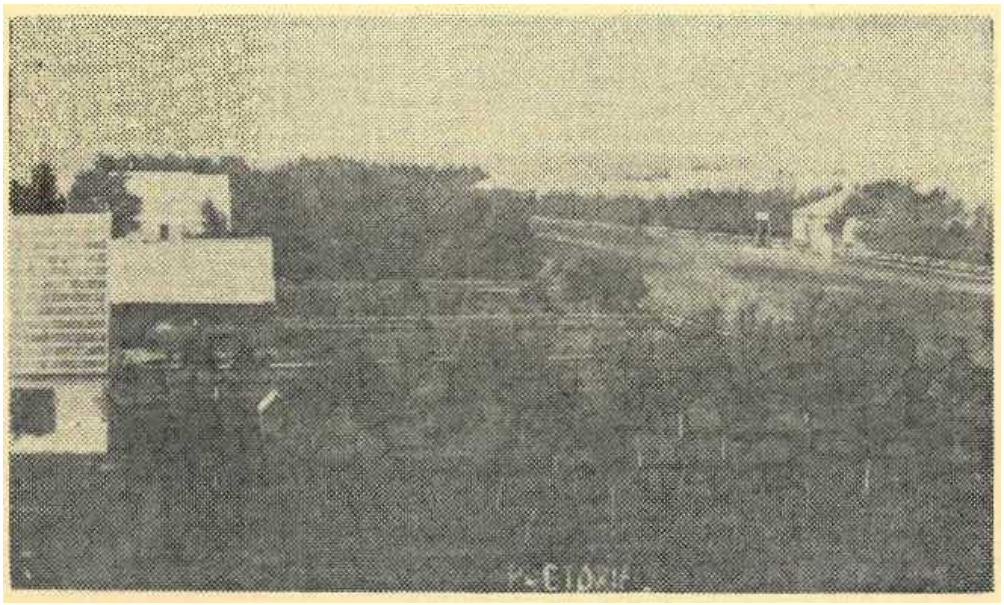
11 *Chortitza's new settlements*

Meanwhile, in the mother colony of Chortitza, Johann Martens from Einlage had become the Oberschulze. He was a large landowner and successful industrialist, a determined man. One day, the regional administration commissioned him to investigate the "Orenburg problem" locally. So, he went there. It was autumn 1899.

With understandable excitement he was awaited at the settlement, while his clients awaited his return with no less impatience. And when he reported to the "Schod" in Chortitza, everyone was surprised to hear that he liked it there very much and that he was particularly taken with the village plan for colony number 14 (later known as Pretoria). He would like to buy whole village plan for himself, and he was offering not 25 but 35 rubles per desjatine!

However, the assembly rejected this undoubtedly favourable offer. The land had been acquired for the landless and not for speculation. But the settlers in the Chortitza colonies paid attention. Was all the bad news from Orenburg exaggerated? Perhaps that settlement was a good investment after all? In any case, suddenly there were again buyers for the still unsettled village sites.

Now the settlement conditions for the new settlers were changed somewhat. The price for 1 desjatine was raised to 30 rubles. In addition, each homestead was to receive not 40 but 60 desjatines of land. A buyer was free to occupy 2 or more farms if he was able to pay the required deposit of 300 roubles each. The remaining debt was to be paid off in 12 equal annual instalments at 6% interest after 2 free years. And finally, each Orenburg resident, had to show, excluding the necessary farming equipment, proof of 600 roubles in cash upon arrival at the site.



Pretoria from the east end

Now people came in droves, eager to buy. Some immediately took over 90 or 180 desjatines and made the required down payments. But some also bought land or an option to buy without the intention of moving Orenburg. They leased their farms in the opinion that they had invested their money particularly advantageously. Village plan number 14 seemed to have a special attraction, according to the advertisement of the business minded Oberschulze. Two

preachers - David Rempel and Heinrich Epp - had also taken over holdings here, and the merchant Heinrich Huebert, Schoenwiese, even had 3.

Village plan number 13 (Suvorovka) was also sold out in a short time under the same conditions. The land there was not quite as good as that of number 14, but this plan had a lot of "non-arable land", which was free and very suitable for grazing cattle, they said reassuringly. Then they went to the notary in Aleksandrovsk to make finalize the deal. Here the Schulze for the new villages were elected, and the villages were given their names. Number 14 already mentioned, was named Pretoria in sympathy with the Boers who had been violated in Africa, and number 13 became Suvorovka, in honour of the Russian commander Suvorov. Schulze in Pretoria was Heinrich Koslowski, who liked to be addressed as Ohm Paul, after Paul Krueger, the President of the Boer Republic. The size of the plots, the width of the road, etc. were also agreed upon in Aleksandrovsk.

Suvorovka also settled some issues right here under the leadership of its first Schulze Abram Froese. That was around the first of December 1899. The move was to begin in March 1900. The preparations began immediately. Superfluous things were sold and necessary things were bought. This group was also granted the cheapest fare on the railway. The journey itself was made in freight wagons.

The re-settlers did not stay long in Pokrovskoye. Both villagers, the Pretorians as well as the Suvorovkas, found friendly reception in nearby Karaguy. This village belonged to the Molotschna plan and was already 5 years old. It lay only about a verst away from Pretoria. Suvorovka was about 5 versts away from Karaguy, and to get there one had to pass Pretoria and the Gussicha.

Karaguyans made it a point to welcome the new settlers well and to accommodate them as comfortably as possible. Most of them had probably brought some comforts with them and were also able to arrange things better than had been possible for the completely impecunious landless. Long-lasting friendships were made during this billeting, which was to be very beneficial for later cooperation, especially in cultural aspects.

Immediately after the snow melted, the village plans were laid out and the first makeshift homes were built. A wide variety of building materials were used, including meadow sod in Pretoria. Suvorovka had a quarry nearby and naturally took advantage of this. Between Pretoria and the next quarry, about 3 versts away, lay the little river Gussicha with its countless swamps. In order to be able to transport the stones, an emergency bridge was hastily built, the swamps were filled with bushes and meadow sod and the connection to the other bank was made. Suvorovka was particularly happy about this, because it shortened the way from Karaguy and Pretoria by two thirds. This bridge was perfectly adequate for the light wagons with the wide wheels of the Russians and Bashkirs, for the transport of stones, but was not strong enough for the iron-clad German factory wagons. One was always glad to get across and move on. Later the bridge was heavily damaged by floods annually, and the settlers were always confronted with the task of strengthening it.

The construction of the dwellings and the most necessary accommodation for the cattle took up so much of everyone's time that there was little time to work the little ploughable land properly. The very necessary ploughing up of meadowland was not considered. Suvorovka, on the other hand, had taken over quite a lot of plough land and was thus able to sow a relatively large amount. When it came to building, people here reached for the ceiling a bit more than in Pretoria. Nevertheless, even there the cash stock shrank astonishing quickly. Almost everywhere the building costs went far beyond the budget. Therefore, the building plans were cut back wherever possible. For this reason, many of farm buildings were left without a rafter roof and only

provisionally covered. Such a flat roof was called a platform. The, at first, too large, barns were also used as living quarters. In one case, the house had to serve as a barn for a short time, as there were no funds left to build the barn that first year.

F. Sawatzky's homestead in Pretoria

Despite the budget cuts, Pretoria became a respectable village within its first year. It soon made a pleasant completed impression. House interiors remained to be completed for a long time, but the industrious hands of the women did not rest until the interior had the appearance that the new settlers had in mind.

The rainy summer of 1900 strongly pushed construction activity. Many things were experienced in the houses made of meadow sod. However, the rain was very good for the grain and the gardens. Everything thrived. Unfortunately, the grain fields were very small. In addition, the price for wheat was low. The wet grain had to be sold far below the value. The harvesting and threshing machines brought along had little to do. These items were advantageous to many a settler in the older villages. They were able to harvest their crops faster and better with the help of these machines. This was the case in Pretoria.

In Suvorovka, as I said, the sowing area was significantly larger than in Pretoria, and the harvest was correspondingly richer. So Suvorovka gained a head start right at the beginning which could only be equaled in later years. That is why most farmers in Pretoria had to borrow flour in the first year, but not in Suvorovka.

Another difficulty was the fact that the settlers had not been able to break up enough meadows. But their strength had not been sufficient. Russians could not be hired either, firstly for lack of money, but also because there was a lack of unity in this matter. The Russians were prepared to break up the meadows even without cash payment, but they then demanded the use of the land for 2 years. The farmers, however, could not agree to such conditions, since they themselves depended on the yield of their land.

Finally, the idea of leasing plough land came up. The Bashkiri in Kunakbay had offered a suitable piece of land. Suvorovka was also able to give some plough land to Pretoria because some of their settlers from Ukraine had not yet arrived.

In winter they had plenty of time to forge plans for the future. They all had food to eat. They also had heating material for the big stoves and fodder for the cattle. Only money was lacking. Pretoria, however, had some credit and was able to take out small loans in the south.

This village, as I said, had made a lot of noise in the south which meant that the last four villages to be settled had found buyers in a short time. They were probably no weaker economically at the beginning than the first 2 villages of this settlement had been. During the first half of this winter, the weather was mild, but there was a lot of snow. This pleased the new settlers, and no one longed for the muddy weather and deep mud of the south. The letters from the settlers to their relatives in the old colony were full of praise for the weather. Then, however, the real Orenburg winter suddenly turned up, and in short time the houses were surrounded by high snow drifts. The winter now also caused severe effects. It was no longer possible to drive with two horses. The track quickly became high and narrow due to the heavy snow. Of necessity, even the most conservative ones switched to single harness. People adapted. But fortunately, only where it was necessary. The Russian small wooden wagons, their wooden ploughs and primitive harrows were not adopted. German farming equipment also became the trump card in Orenburg. How amazed the Russians and the Bashkirs were when they saw the German mounted wagons, the spring wagons and the long agricultural wagons. Many had never seen such threshing machines or even self-binders.

In the spring, Pretoria again received new members from Ukraine - Wilhelm Pries and Wilhelm Loewen. The latter had even bought two farms from those who had taken them over and overestimated their strength. Both were relatively well-off and very hopeful.

Some of the settlers, as already mentioned, also leased land from the Bashkirs. This land was not bad, and it was cheap. But now they had to sow in 2 places. One farmer also rented plough land in Suvorovka - also not expensive. After the sowing on the south side of the Gussicha was finished, he went over to Suvorovka.

Immediately after the end of the sowing season, the breaking up of the meadows began. But success was generally limited and depended entirely on the available tractive power and the amount of fodder.

In the meantime, much work had been done in the 4 villages of the new settlement - Dolinovka, Radnitchnoye, Dobrovka and Kitchkas. Large and small buildings had erected. The dry weather had been exploited everywhere.

On Sundays, visiting was cultivated as much as possible, not only in the villages, but in the entire settlement. People went for "strolls" and paid visits. One discovered relatives and made new friendships.

As a result of the prolonged dry weather, the harvest was early and weak. After the flour debt had been settled and some other debts paid, one could see the bottom of the treasury. With this sign, the second and last free year came to an end for these 2 villages, Pretoria and Suvorovka. As early as 1902, these settlements had been supposed to pay 200 rubles to the Land Treasury for each farm of 60 desjatines. But the flour debts took precedence over all other debts.

No one had to go hungry in the coming winter either. Some farmers had even been able to slaughter a pig or several boars. Where there was a particular shortage, good friends helped out to the best of their ability. In Pretoria, the 2 new farmers, Pries and Loewen, had been able to carry out their large building projects, which was a great credit to the village. Trees, mostly

poplars, were planted and grew well. Later, however, the settlers felt like Schiller's "Sorcerer's Apprentice": "The ghosts I called up I cannot get rid of now". The poplars took up more and more land with their many far-reaching root shoots.

In 1902, the work was tackled with renewed courage. The settlers were no longer interested in the Bashkir land. It was clear to them that they had to stick to their own soil. Therefore, more meadow was broken, and with ever greater success. The horses had become more workable as a result of better feeding. This summer also had more rainfall and the harvest was above average. But there was still no thought of making payments on the land for the time being.

In order to make faster progress, Kitchkas, for example, gave all his meadowland intended for grain cultivation to a Russian merchant. He cultivated it and had the use of its harvests it for 2 years.

With borrowed money, Pretoria built a spacious school of fired bricks. Wilhelm Pries was the Schulze, Peter Dyck the clerk and Wilhelm Loewen builder. Then came the news that the Chortitza Oberschulze wanted to visit the Orenburg settlement and help the land commission collect its money. This caused no small commotion in the settlement.

A Pretorian tells us: "Suddenly all the disappointments we had already experienced with this number 14 were before us again. Our village plan was on a flat ridge on hills stretching from south to north. On both sides it fell off - gradually in the north, but more steeply in the west and a portion to the east, and was interrupted by a few short side valleys. After a short stay at the settlement, we realised that we had drawn the short straw after all. But we were not aware of the full extent of our deception at that time. It was only when we started to divide up the land in 1901 that we realised one thing after another. We had to use 40-foot poles to determine the direction of our boundary furrows from the centre. Our shares were very different, depending on length and quality. The nature lover might enjoy the often quite steep slopes, but the farmer would literally wish them elsewhere. He was already worried about how he was going to get up there with his plough team, and only then what about the mower!

The soil was of varying quality. Besides the best black earth, there were extensive areas of harder clay or even saltpetre. A dear neighbour of ours, Warkentin, said after we had made these observations: "God must have created our land last, and this is how it turned out." We did not complain about God, but we did complain about the Oberschulze in Ukraine. We finally came to the conclusion that our land was inferior to that of the old settlers on the Chortitza plan. Incidentally, the Molotschna villages on the Gussicha were no better off than.

Oberschulze Martens should get to hear the truth when he appears here, we all agreed. But then the clenched fist remained in the pocket. Since we had not made the payment due on the land, the Chortitza Volost sent some men to our settlement take a look. The Oberschulze also came with them. He liked our village, and he also praised our beautiful school. But then he immediately and without further ado came to the purpose of his visit.

"I want money from you!"

All the landlords are gathered at the Schulze's.

"We cannot make the required payment."

"Then you pay half."

"We can't do that either."

"Well, can't you pay anything?"

"No."

Then the Oberschulze asked each one of us personally. But from each of the questioned he heard only one word: "No".

Well," said the Oberschulze, "There is one thing I like about you: You are united. But we didn't come here to find that out. We want money, and you must pay half of the amount due."

"How are we supposed to pay if we don't have the money and can't raise it?"

"You can raise it; you'll just have to borrow it."

"Where? Would you perhaps advance us the money?"

"No, but I can take out a loan for you if you authorise me do so."

Our somewhat intimidated Schulze wanted to issue the power of attorney immediately, without having heard the opinion of his villagers. When objections were made, he hesitated. But then he put it to the vote. And the community gave its consent. With the power of attorney in his pocket, the Oberschulze took his leave without showing the slightest interest in the fate of the settlers. Business is business. Our fist, however, had remained in our pocket.

"Well, you didn't say anything," one asked a bit angrily of those who had been so cheeky earlier.

"Neither did you."

"Yes, we were waiting for you," it comes back mockingly.

Suvorovka, however, paid the required half of the debt from its own resources.

In other villages, the Oberschulze was a little more benevolent. He had to be happy if people did not ask him for help. The worst off economically were probably the villages of Nikolayevka, Feodorovka and Kantserovka. Kamenka was probably the best off among the first eight villages. The remaining four villages recovered visibly. Only the flour shortage and borrowing had apparently become chronic. And when the sowing season came, many of them certainly lacked seed. And the seeds, often borrowed at the highest prices, were almost too good for the insufficiently cultivated soil. Weedy fields were a danger to the better cultivated ones.

But here, too, there were farmers in every village who made progress despite all the difficulties. They also fought successfully against the proliferating quack grass. In the dry years, this plague could have been tackled more vigorously, but it was precisely in such years that hay was urgently needed. Eventually, prosperity began to rise gradually between the bad harvests, if keeping one's head above water can be described as prosperity.

The bad harvests returned regularly almost every 5th year. Such a year always set back even the economically strongest. Those who had made it out of the greatest difficulties were sometimes able to buy half a homestead, sometimes an entire homestead, from those who were almost hopelessly behind in their farming. With the sowing area thus enlarged, economic recovery and strengthening was easier. As time went by, the children grew up as well. Many young families had been among the settlers. If, however, one of the unfortunates could not to move forward, it was sometimes helpful to move to another village.

Slowly the village communities grew together into a community, and gradually something like a feeling of togetherness began to stir or form in the settlement. This feeling of unity was significantly strengthened by a leader or manager. Unfortunately, the two halves of the settlement - the Chortitza and the Molotschna - each remained on their own. It wasn't until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 that the administrative unification was forced, as was the cultural aspect.

The remote market and the lack of competition were among the most serious economic problems of the settlement - Pokrovskoye was 50 to 70 and Orenburg up to about 100 versts away, only Zelyonoye was closer to the railway. As soon as the harvest was in, the creditors held out their hands, the village Schulze, because of the dire flour debt, demanded their part.

Most of the wheat was driven to Pokrovskoye. But more than 2 trips could not be made in 1 week with the same horses. Of course, the weather also played a very important role. The urgently needed and timely stubble ploughing was thus missed, much to the detriment of the next

harvest. For some of the settlers, these trips were also disadvantageous because they then converted part of the proceeds into alcohol.

Wheat prices were set arbitrarily by the Russian wheat traders in Pokrovskoye. There was no competition. As soon as a load of German wheat arrived, the farmers gathered around the wagon. The farmer stood a sack upright and opened it. Several hands reached in, scooped out a handful of wheat and examined it. Then one of the merchants quoted a price, a price as low as possible. Out bidding was not customary. Russians also knew very well that the colonist would not take the wheat back to the settlement.

If 2 offers were made at the same time, then the dice decided. A silver ruble was tossed in the air. If the double eagle came to rest upright, then the tosser of the coin had won. The owner of the wheat was only a spectator. He had to take what was offered. Once the wheat was sold, the farmer had to drive it to the merchant's storehouse and unload it there himself. Here the grain was weighed again.

Those colonists who were able to keep their wheat until the new year or even until the spring did much better. They were then able to complete their fieldwork on time in autumn. Their horses were less worn out and they could still turn over all their land in autumn.

Around the turn of the year, most grain prices began to rise. Then carters - Russians, Bashkirs and Tatars - came to the farms to buy grain on their own, and often paid considerably more here than the farmer had been able to get in Pokrovskoye in the autumn. But "where it's thin, it tears", says a Russian proverb, and a German one claims that the poor always have to pay twice.

The economic system adopted from the Ukraine, which was not always suitable for Orenburg in every respect, caused considerable difficulties and setbacks. Many wanted to continue farming in exactly the same way as they were used to in their old homeland. But the soil and climate here were very different from those in the Ukraine, and the long distance to the railway also played a major role economically.

How advantageous it would have been if the Land Commission of the Mother Colonies, before buying the land in Orenburg, had looked at the settlement of Am Trakt and Alt Samara. A visit to the Mennonites in Turkestan would also have been worthwhile. And above all, the country should have been visited in summer rather than winter. Perhaps the Commission would have realised, after careful examination of the circumstances, that in Orenburg the mixed economy is the most appropriate. Wheat crops alone are too much at risk from the periodic drought; they had always been preceded by a few lean years. But for dairy products - butter and cheese - there has always been a good market. London would have been just as happy to buy butter from Orenburg and would have paid no less for it than it did later for butter from Siberia

The Russian domestic market was also quite receptive and willing. But the settlers were economically too weak and initially too inexperienced to grasp the market conditions in the country and to conquer their share. The rich mother (colony) in the south should have been in charge, she had enough experience and experts who could have put the settlement on the right economic track.

Poverty of the settlers also offered the usurer the best opportunities for enrichment. Debt and credit were in constant feud. The young settlement lacked everything: flour, meat, lard or tallow, clothes, even felt boots and furs for the winter. The school also had to be maintained and, last but not least, the community also. Even the most modest Christmas celebration cost money. If illness came on top of that, the colonist thought he was drowning in debt. For his income was only a drop in the bucket.

Due to this, he could not avoid borrowing and "taking credit". The cash was almost horribly expensive, and the interest rates rose almost immeasurably. One percent a month was still considered a concession. Despite the greatest efforts, the debts had to pile up in a short time. But not only the individual, also the village communities got into debt in this way. The flour debt to Oberlaender in Orenburg always had to be paid before he would grant new credit. And if it was no longer possible, then the only way left was to go to the money lender.

These circumstances even paralysed the will of some people. They became dull and allowed themselves to be driven by the circumstances. Sometimes only the brave Mennonite woman "stood her ground". She had truly learned to save and divide. She was the last to go to bed at night and the first to get up in the morning. And it was not uncommon that she, the "weaker sex", had to encourage her husband and lift him up.

Fortunately, the despondent were among the exceptions. Most of them soon picked themselves up again. Often relatives in the south stepped in and helped with small sums of money, which were able to do much in the bitterly poor settlement.

12 *Drought setbacks*

The settlers in Orenburg must have noticed the very different crop yields after only a few years. A certain rhythm almost jumped out. The years 1901, 1906, 1911, 1916/17, 1921 of complete failure or very poor harvests hit the colonists extraordinarily hard and set them far back economically. 1906 was such a catastrophic year.

The snowmelt started earlier than usual this year. Spring was cool and dry. There had been little winter moisture, and now there was no rain. The grain failed to germinate from the beginning. The grass also suffered from the scorching rays of the sun. The hay harvest was extremely poor. Under these circumstances, the harvest's almost-certain failure began to worry the settlers by the summer. There were no provisions. Precautions were therefore taken in good time to avert the worst consequences of a bad harvest. Above all, the settlement sent a call for help to the mother colony in the south. Each of the 2 settlement halves proceeded on its own. And the plea was not in vain. Chortitza immediately sent a commission to investigate the extent of the need on the spot.

The report of this commission to the home communities was that help was absolutely necessary. It was estimated that the settlement would need 15 wagons of flour. Clothes would also have to be collected in the Ukraine. Orenburgers were asked to negotiate cheap railway fares. The commission refused to help with cattle feed. The settlement would have to try to make do with the available supplies - mostly old wheat straw.

The settlement first approached the head of the area, the Semsky Natschalynik, about reduced railway fares. He referred them to the governor in Orenburg. Here, too, they encountered difficulties, because the articles of settlement did not provide for such a case. In special cases, the governor had the right to act at his own discretion. He therefore passed the settlers' application on to the Board of Directors, which then approved it. This meant a very significant reduction in the cost of the relief operation, as the flour had to be transported by rail for almost 2000 versts. Settlers in Orenburg were asked to have the 15 valuable documents brought to Chortitza by a trusted man, which they did.

The Orenburgers' cry for help did not go in vain. Mother Chortitza did not need to be asked twice. The flour was immediately sent on its way and arrived quickly and safely in Platovka. A clothing collection was also carried out in the south. Furthermore, 200 rubles were donated for the purchase of felt boots for school children. However, these were not all voluntary contributions. The Chortitza area assembly had decided to raise the money by a levy of 45 kopeks per desjatine.

Soon, however, it became clear that another 10 wagons of flour would be needed to get the settlement through the winter. This was accomplished in the shortest time possible. An easier way to obtain the cheap railway fare was also found. Through the efforts of the Chortitza Volost, the chairman of the relief or local committee in Orenburg became an honorary member of the Red Cross. This cost only 200 rubles. Now the goods could be transported at significantly reduced freight rates.

The local committee also had the task of examining the submissions of the needy from the villages and bringing their wishes into line with the aid possibilities. It also supervised the care of the supplies and the donations received. It was not surprising that some families felt disadvantaged even with the fairest distribution. The distribution of the clothing coming from rich Mennonite families caused particular headaches. These did not fit at all into the families of these poor settlers. Even the most beautiful silk dress cannot replace the urgently needed shirt. Finally, the idea arose to auction these articles and then to buy appropriate fabrics with the proceeds.

Meanwhile, the turn of the year was approaching and it was becoming clear that the cattle would not be able to get through the winter with the available wheat straw alone. In some places, help was already urgently needed. What to do? Ask the 'mother in the south' again? No, there was no joy in receiving alms. But a way out had to be found.

One of the neighbours, the Russian landowner Subottin, had a lot of hay. So, a delegation was sent to him. But he demanded 20 roubles for a sashen [7 feet] high haystack! That was three times the normal price. But the settlement absolutely and urgently needs cattle fodder, and at least 200 sashen. But that is 4000 roubles! A huge sum. It is impossible for the settlement to raise this money. The landowner is willing to defer the money until next autumn if the head of and the chairman of the local committee sign the promissory note. There is great hesitation, but the predicament of the settlement makes it inevitable to accept these conditions. And so, the cattle were saved. And in the autumn the miracle actually happened: the settlement managed to pay back the 4000 rubles in cash.

Now the hay had to be brought in with the underfed horses, despite the cold and storm and deep snow. The villages further away were at a greater disadvantage. Their dilapidated horses now had to carry on, and with them the carters. But then the spring finally came and made up for a lot. The fields could be cultivated again. The cattle recovered quickly on the good pasture. Until autumn, however, there were still many problems to be solved, not least for the businessmen. But slowly life returned to normal and courage returned. The prospects for the future became better with each passing day due to the good state of the seed. But it was still impossible to pay off the land debt.

In 1907/09, a relatively strong migration to Siberia began. It was caused not only by the bad year of 1906, but also by the great benefits granted by the government to the re-settlers in Siberia. Land was allotted to them free of charge, wells were prepared, and each family received 100 roubles as financial support. This attracted, and a large number of families from most of the villages went there. Most of them settled in the area of the later established Slavgorod and the already existing Pavlodar. As it turned out later, these settlers had made a very advantageous exchange in every respect. The Mennonite settlements in Siberia generally developed without serious setbacks and also much more rapidly than in Orenburg.

The migration created large gaps in the villages. Many families had moved away, especially from the Molotschna villages. For those who stayed behind, this migration meant an economic strengthening. Now additional land could be bought under favourable conditions and the farms became more viable in this way. Now and then, new arrivals from the south filled the gap, and since these newcomers usually brought money with them, the damage caused by the departure was soon made up for.

In a few years, however, there was a second severe setback. In 1911, Orenburg had another total crop failure due to prolonged drought. And again, the mother colony in the south stepped in and helped where it was necessary. A large number of settler families, however, did not need the help this time, as some supplies had already been accumulated. In Chortitza, Jakob Wiebe was the Oberschulze that year. He, as well as his predecessor Peter Koop, had tried to get to the bottom of the actual cause of the unsatisfactory development in Orenburg. On their initiative, a seed wheat fund, which belonged to Chortitza in the south, had been set up soon after 1906. From this fund, needy settlers received seed wheat on loan, and they had to return the wheat after the first harvest with a 10% surcharge. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement. In this way, the carpet was pulled out from under the usurers.

1912 then brought another very good harvest, which largely made up for the damage of the bad harvest. The land rose in price. This gave the land commission of Chortitza the

opportunity to transfer the land in Orenburg to the local bank at a much higher price or to take out a higher mortgage than had previously been possible. Chortitza now gave each of the Orenburg villages title to the land, and so Orenburg became independent in this respect as well.

A result of this arrangement was that the settlement no longer had to deal with the mother colony in matters of the land debt, but with the local land bank in Orenburg. The settlement had now made so much economic progress that it could hope to deal with the rest of the land debt without help from the south. This hope was not deceived.

A strange natural phenomenon should be noted here. In 1913, numerous new springs appeared the settlement, dried-up springs burst open and old ones became richer in water. In Pretoria a new spring opened up on high ground, swamped the surrounding area and made ploughing impossible.

The Russians and Bashkirs, who also observed this phenomenon in their country, said: "The earth is crying. A very great misfortune is coming over our land." The German settlers, however, thought of the rainy year 1912 as an explanation, but this phenomenon had not been observed in other equally wet summers.

13 *Health care*

The poverty of the settlers was of course the best breeding ground for all kinds of diseases and epidemics. The extremely unhealthy dwellings in the damp earth huts ruined the health of many colonists or even laid the seeds for slow infirmity. The children especially suffered from the dampness and the lack of light and air. If the so-called children's diseases - measles, chicken pox, scarlet fever, mumps and diphtheria - were added, the small hillocks in the new cemeteries multiplied in frightening ways.

David Lepp, Deyevka, reports on this: The first winter was very hard for many and made extraordinary demands also on the health of the settlers. Soon diseases broke out, unknown diseases that claimed many victims. In Deyevka alone, 38 children and 4 adults died. The Lepp family alone lost 4 children. It is possible that the mortality rate was highest in Deyevka. But conditions were no better in the other villages either. Even later, the inadequate sanitary conditions caused many a hardship.

The closest doctor, actually a medical assistant (German - Feldscher), lived in the Russian village of Totshki, about 30 versts away. A few years after the arrival of the Orenburg settlers, that market town received a licensed doctor and a hospital, which was also used by the settlers in emergencies.

A doctor by the name of Popov worked in Pokrovskoye at the time, he was also involved in his brother’s grain trade. A small hospital was there, but it was only able to treat the slightly ill. The seriously ill had to be taken to the city of Orenburg. But it was 100 versts from Deyevka to the city. And the use of the railway was not practical especially in the case of accidents. It was 70 versts from Deyevka to the railway station. If help was needed quickly, the horses had to do the work, but often help came too late.

Under these circumstances, it is understandable that the colonists liked to resort to home remedies. Sometimes they helped, but not infrequently they also did harm. Thus, the sick were often expected to undergo horse cures by their well-meaning neighbours. But many a sick person got well anyway.

Especially the "bone doctors" [*Knochenaertze*], among whom there were also real experts, usually had their hands full. But if the patient was lucky, he came out of the treatment without any major damage. Some, however, became cripples for life due to improper treatment. Real experts in the field of bone medicine were Dietrich Hildebrandt-Burwalde and Wiebe-Lichtfelde. But of course, the people of Orenburg only saw them on very rare occasions. Peter P. Rempel in Pretoria had a “good hand” in Orenburg, but moved to Siberia in 1908. He was less skilled in treating bone fractures than in treating the sick in general, especially nervous patients. His personality radiated strength, and the sick gladly confided in him. Joh. Wolff, Romanovka, and others were also among the "fixers" [*Zurechtmacher* - amateur chiropractors].

The midwives of the Orenburgers also came from their own ranks. Among them there were women who, with almost no previous training, nevertheless provided excellent services while others were less successful and were responsible for many a woman's illness. Of course, the service, which had to be done in all weathers, was not easy for the midwives either. Their remuneration was also very modest.

It was not until the twenties of this century that the settlement was also attended by professionally trained midwives: Mrs. Janzen - Klubnikovo, Miss Katharina Pries - Pretoria, Miss Maria Hamm - Dobrovka and others. Despite this inadequate obstetric care, the mortality rate among women in labour and newborns was low.

Mrs. Jakob Giesbrecht was a much-appreciated midwife in Petrovka, because she put her heart and soul into helping the women in labour, and also showed a lot of goodwill and tact in her dealings with people. In Kantserovka, the experienced Mrs. Kornelius Kaehler was in charge, and in Deyevka Mrs. Kornelius Giesbrecht was favoured. In the Molotschna villages, Mrs. Isaak Neufeld - Kamyshovoye was one of the most favoured midwife.

Already at the turn of the century, things got a little better in terms of training the women. One of the first trained midwives was Mrs. David Janz (her husband was a homoeopath) from Sagradovka. The Janz family lived in Chernoye Osero. Later, Mrs. David Guenther, a teacher's wife, and Mrs. Franz Unruh, the wife of a very successful farmer in Kitchkas, were also particularly sought after.

In 1901 "Doctor Braun", a healer (Russian: Lekar), an excellent doctor and philanthropist, came to Orenburg. He moved from Sergeievka to Orenburg in May 1902 and began his beneficial work in Deyevka. After 4 years he moved to neighbouring Romanovka, where he acquired a well-established homestead. Although he was not a qualified doctor, he created an extensive practice for himself in a short time. Of course, this could not remain unnoticed by the surrounding Russian doctors, and it was understandable that they very soon drew the attention of the police to the activities of the German doctor, who could not prove that he had any "authorisation".

Dr Johann Braun's hope was his son Hans, who also wanted to study medicine and become a doctor. In 1905, he finished grammar school in Ekaterinoslav with the best results. The graduation was celebrated with his comrades. Afterwards they went down to the Dnepr to swim. In the process, the budding medical student fell under a raft and drowned. This hit the father extraordinarily hard. His hope of opening a practice with his son in a few years was destroyed forever.

In order to fend off the envious Russian competition, Dr. Braun, with the help of various other doctors, finally came upon the idea of using a retired Russian doctor's name as a cover. Dr. Michel from Peterburg agreed to give his name in exchange for compensation. But this "working marriage" turned out not to be a very successful one. Dr. Michel was a retired colonel, a former military doctor, who had retired because of his advanced age. He had hoped to experience a second youth in the acknowledged healthy air of Orenburg and by drinking the famous mare's milk, but he was deceived. His hopes were not to be fulfilled. He recovered so well that he could participate in the treatment of the sick instead of merely signing the prescriptions issued by Dr. Braun. He seemed to have little interest in allopathy, as he prescribed all kinds of home remedies, compresses, etc. to his patients, and occasionally even claimed that the pharmacies were "the devil's kitchens".

Then one day his much younger wife appeared on the scene. She informed her husband of her arrival by telegraph. Dr Michel immediately left for Pokrovskoye to pick up his wife. On the way, however, he fell ill and was not to see the settlement again. Shortly after his wife arrived, he died in Pokrovskoye.

Until 1908, Dr. Braun, equally appreciated by Germans and Russians, continued his successful work. Then he returned to the south with his family. Here he settled in New York, in the settlement of Ignatyevka, as a doctor for the Niebuhr factory. He kept homestead in Romanovka.

Dr. Braun had been suffering from gallstones, which caused him severe pain, for a long time. This illness was also the reason why he left Orenburg, as the driving on the bad roads was becoming increasingly unbearable for him. Especially in winter, driving on the potholed roads was torture for him.

In 1911, he was relieved of his suffering and died. Shortly before his passing, he asked his companions to sing the song: "Let me go....". He sang along vigorously while sitting, then went to his bed and died.

Even today, after almost half a century, Dr. Braun has not yet been forgotten by those who knew him. He was a brilliant doctor and a humanitarian. Famous were his sure diagnoses, and no less famous among his colleagues - his Latin. Since his parents were poor, they had not been able to make it possible for him to study. In order to participate at least indirectly in his desired profession, he entered the service of the well-known Dr. Heinrichsen in Kotschubej in Kherson. Since Braun had unusual physical strength, he often had to substitute as the operating table and hold the patients during minor operations. And when Braun pressed the patient's head together as if in a vice, then heavy eye operations could be carried out without worry.

One day Braun was busy in the pharmacy when he was called to hold onto a patient. When Braun enters the room and sees the patient, he says to Dr Heinrichsen: "This one will hold still without me." “Good.” Immediately the doctor began the painful operation, and the patient did indeed hold still. He did not twitch a muscle.

After the operation was finished, the doctor wanted to know from what Braun had concluded that the patient would keep still.

"Well, that's my cousin," was the reply.

And that the later Dr. Braun was endowed with extraordinary willpower was something his patients and acquaintances were to experience on many occasions. The gallstones often caused him extraordinary distress, but his patients did not notice a thing. His hand did not tremble and Braun remained completely calm in every situation. Sometimes, however, he would roll on the floorboard in pain - when he was safe from witnesses.

Braun was the "colony doctor" on the settlement, that is, he was employed by the settlement so that even the poorest settler had access to him.

This mode was also maintained when Dr. Junovitsch, a Pole and a talented doctor, became the successor of Dr. Braun. He was the lucky owner of a motorbike, which was to be of great advantage for the settlement. This means of transport was of great service in the summer, especially in the case of the frequent accidents. After the outbreak of the war in 1914, Dr. Junovitsch was called up and a German medic, Schmidt, came in his place. At same time a Russian medic settled in Kamyshovoye. During the war, the United States opened a pharmacy in Pretoria for the German civilian prisoners interned on the settlement. It was run by a chemist, Mr. Heep.

In 1922, in spring, the AMR sent a doctor to the settlement. It was Dr Rudolf Abr. Klassen from Alt Samara. He had recently finished his studies in Moscow. After such a long time without a doctor, he had his hands full. But he was drawn back to Moscow. A beautiful and dear woman of Riga was waiting for him there. After they had married, they emigrated to Canada, where Dr. Klassen settled in Winnipeg. Here he acquired all the rights of a doctor and opened his own practice. In Orenburg he was followed by a Latvian, Dr. Lassmann, an experienced doctor, but unfortunately a drunkard. Lassmann practised first in Klubnikovo, then in Pretoria, but soon left the settlement for good.

Around 1925, the Soviet government opened a hospital with a permanent doctor in Radnitchnoye. It acquired the farm of the preacher Gerhard D. Rempel, who emigrated to Canada. This so-called medical point, which was run for a long time by a Russian doctor Shestakov, is said to still exist today (1951).

III Community Leadership

14 *The Mennonite Churches (M.C.)*

a) **Deyevka Mennonite Church** according to P.P.D.

That an organised congregation is of particular importance in a new settlement was also observed in Orenburg. The congregation was the centre of the whole spiritual and intellectual life. Not only did it take care of a large part of the purely administrative work, but also formed the moral backbone of the settlers. The church helped with advice and action in the needs of soul and of body. Mennonite tradition again had an excellent effect on this settlement.

It was a matter of tradition for all these pioneers that, as soon as possible after the erection of the first emergency shelters, the building of the church and the merging of the many family units into one congregation would have to be completed.

Deyevka Mennonite congregation was founded in 1894, most probably at the same time as the first election of preachers on September 25th of that year. The congregation was initially considered a branch of the Chortitza congregation in the Ukraine.

Since their own elder had not yet been elected, Aeltester [elder] Boschmann of the Mennonite congregation in Pleshanovo was called in for baptisms. Baptismal ceremonies generally, take place on the first day of Pentecost, but in order to give the Aeltester the opportunity to come to the settlement by sleigh, it had to take place, as already mentioned, in March.

After 5 years, the Deyevka Mennonite congregation became independent. On August 15, 1899, preacher Abram Penner, Nikolayevka, was elected as Altester and his ordination held on the following day, the congregation ceased to be an offshoot of Chortitza congregation. Until then, the congregation had been cared for and lead by preacher Abram Olfert, Kantserovka. Of course, they remained in close contact with the mother congregation in Chortitza, where at that time the wise Aeltester Isaak Dyck had already developed his beneficial work.

Aelt. Abram Pet. Penner

The different circumstances at the new settlement made some changes in the church council necessary. The early difficult years gave rise to necessities for which the old traditional order had no solution. This was especially true for the care of the youth. It was agreed to extend catechism instruction to include all youth who had completed their schooling. This instruction was

carried out through the months of January to Easter. Lessons were always held Sunday afternoons. Older church members also participated as audience members.

Those intending baptism partook in additional classes after the lessons and two deep, personal discussion were held. The baptismal candidate had the opportunity to speak with a minister of his area or from his particular station. The candidate was free to choose his own 'spiritual father'. This arrangement often led to a closeness between candidate and his minister.

At the second discussion, the Aeltester took charge of the meeting. Of course, the local preachers and deacons tried to win the trust of the candidates for baptism and to make their way to Jesus easier. Some older brothers and sisters in the congregation helped with the same.

Aeltester H.D. Rempel

Orenburg preachers and deacons owed a great deal to the old and experienced Ohm Jakob Rempel, then Kamenka, later Dolinovka. The air was always blowing around this preacher, so to speak. His balanced nature, his prudence and his spiritual equanimity, yes, his wisdom also encouraged the timid and calmed and steered those not confident forward. He belonged to the Mennonite church and to Mennonitism as a whole, but he always stood up for the unity of all God's children. This attitude also broadened the hearts and spiritual horizons of the preachers who looked up to him.

A greater fostering also meant that the teaching brothers and deacons were united with each one another. Older preachers placed newly-elected young preachers as equals in their discussions. This brotherly attitude made the advice of the elders more effective and gave the younger ones courage to speak at meetings. This continued until 1907, and the work was not without blessings. Again and again, young people in particular, heard the call to a new spiritual life and followed this call.

But despite this fraternal bond, not everything was perfect in this community either. A young settlement always offers many sources of conflict. Here it was the question of the location of the planned central school that kept the community in a state of agitation for a long time. After three years of back and forth, the Elder Abram Penner retired at request of the congregation. The church leadership was returned to Abram Olfert and baptism and communion was served by the neighbouring Aeltester Johann Baergmann from the Nikolayevka congregation.

Aeltester Abram Penner, however, believed that he had been called to his office by God, and he did not acknowledge that the congregation was authorised (to remove him) therefore

considered himself in office before God. But only 3 preachers supported him and few church members from the villages. This side attempted to hold meetings and services in private residences but that soon failed. The preachers returned to the bosom of the congregation while Ex-Aelt. Penner never again felt the closeness to his congregation even until his death in 1933.

In 1911, preacher Heinrich Rempel, Petrovka, was elected elder, who served his congregation with sacrificial loyalty for about 12 years. It was probably cancer of the throat that brought him to an all-too-early end in 1924. During the time of Aelt. Rempel's leadership, a very successful revival movement took place. The preacher and missionary Johann J. Peters, Susannovo, felt compelled to make house visits to almost all families within the settlement.

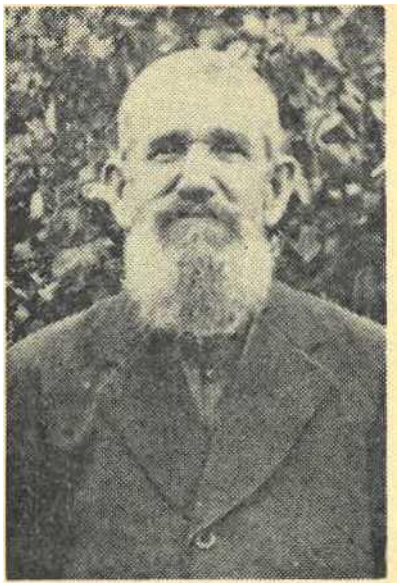
Aelt. Isaak G. Krahn

Aelt. Rempel's successor in 1925 was preacher and teacher Isaak Georg Krahn, Dolinovka. He was very gifted, had a pronounced gift of oratory and a firm will. But in those years, the freedom to develop congregations and to expand congregational life was no longer possible. The persecution of Christians did not begin overnight, even in red Orenburg. At first there were antagonisms within the congregation, then a waning of interest particularly now that it was necessary to fight for the congregation, and finally there was increasing pressure from the outside.

In September 1929, Aeltester Krahn was ordered to Orenburg. After his return, all members of the congregation had to register themselves personally in the church register. Some members, who had otherwise regularly attended the services, refused to register, while others, who had hardly ever been seen in church voluntarily signed.

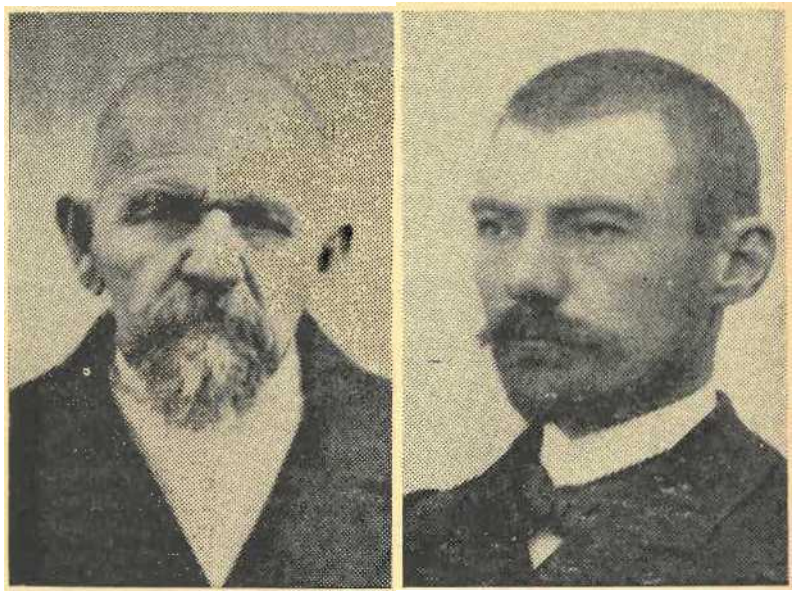
Aeltester Krahn was a staunch opponent of emigration. In 1930 he was banished to the infamous White Sea Island of Solovki for 10 years. The same fate is said to have befallen the other members of the church council. Now the church meetings also ceased. One exception seems to have been preacher Dietrich Lepp in Deyevka. According to a private letter, he was still ministering in the congregation in 1935 and is even said to have married and baptised. But 2 years later he wrote to friends in America that he had changed his place of residence, but that he

could not explain the reasons for this step. He then had to work very hard at his new place of residence and broke two ribs while carrying a heavy load. In 1939 he died as a result of this accident at the age of 82.



Dietrich Lepp

The Deyevka Mennonite congregation had about 30 preachers serve them until 1930. Three of them were immigrant preachers. Three preachers died and 3 moved away. Three preachers transferred to the Mennonite Brethren. The congregation numbered about 1300 members.



I.J. Loewen and P.P. Dyck of Deyevka Mennonite

There was also a social problem on the settlement of Orenburg. However, the social contrasts here were only slight. There were really only 2 groups: the very poor and the less poor. The less poor could keep their heads above water a little easier. They had more horses than the

very poor and could therefore cultivate their fields better and faster. As a result, their harvest was usually more productive. And in autumn they had fewer oppressive debts. This was felt more severely by the economically weaker. They often felt set back for no reason, they thought they were overlooked. They also considered themselves disadvantaged, because they had to share the village burdens equally with all other neighbours. After all, they too were full owners of farms. Thus, the fact that their income was lower could not be taken into account. But the relationship between the 'rich' and poor was never really bad but it wasn't good either.

Where poverty was not the result of laziness, carelessness or even drunkenness (a very rare vice in the settlement, by the way), the families thus disadvantaged by fate were treated with consideration and supported. Likewise, efforts were made to help the innocent family of a "black sheep". Many a gift of love from individuals and families went quietly into the houses and huts of the economically challenged.

In addition, the municipal coffers and the poor relief officers of the municipalities also took care of remedying or alleviating real hardship. Very often, the village communities themselves stepped in, even if they cannot always be accused of having a "velvet glove" and the necessary sensitivity.

Someone once expressed the view that the preachers on the settlement had also been among the "socially guilty" because a large number of them also belonged to the wealthy. In general, however, this is not true. There were poor to very poor preachers on the settlement. These were probably always privately supported, so that they did not become a burden upon the congregation. It is also not true that some preachers would have liked to ignore the poorer members of their congregation during house calls. The service of the preacher applied equally to all villages. The preacher had to leave his family alone at home Sunday after Sunday and travel to villages either nearer or farther away for the service. In winter, on the short days, he usually had to prepare to leave on Saturday afternoon in order to be there on time on Sunday. The question of where to spend the night arose. If a preacher, a deacon or a good acquaintance lived in the village, this question was quickly solved. Sometimes, however, their economic situation or the room conditions did not allow them to accommodate a guest overnight. It is understandable that the preacher preferred to stay with a professional colleague in order to discuss pastoral care issues.

In almost every village there was a so-called preachers' hostel, which, by the way, could also accommodate non-preachers. These were mostly farms with appropriate living space and church members who had made it their job to welcome God's messengers for the sake of Jesus. Their horses were not neglected either. By the time dinner was served at 8 or 9 o'clock, it was too late for private visits. One should not forget that the preachers were also farmers and that they came from work. Their need for rest, especially in summer, was no less than that of their other colleagues.

On Sunday afternoons, however, the preacher had to leave in good time to reach his home before dark. Not infrequently, was he put in serious danger by the often and sudden onset of snowstorms. Social conditions in 1917 were such that not a single communist or even a single "red" showed even the slightest interest in the settlement. They were to be "absent" from the settlement for several years yet.

Ministerial Council at Deyevka Mennonite Church:

Olfert, Abram (b. 10.03.1846) elected 23 Sept 1894, ordained 25 Sept 1894.

Lepp, Dietr. Aron (b. 6.071857) elected 23 Sept 1894, ordained 25 Sept 1894.

Penner, Abram (b. 4.04.1856) elected 7 March 1896, ordained 8 March 1899, stepped down 16 August 1909, deposed 5 May 1910.
Toews, David (b. 26.03.1852) elected 7 March 1896, ordained 8 March 1896, resigned 1908(?).
Neudorf, Johann (b. 20.08.1857) elected 15 August 1899, ordained 16 August 1899, struck by lightning on 21 April 1903 (died).
Penner, Jakob Jak. (deacon) (b. 20.04.1872) elected 15 Aug. 1899, ordained 16 Aug. 1899, inactive as of 25 May 1910.
Loewen, Isaak Jakob (b. 2.04.1867) elected 27 December 1900, ordained 17 January 1901, died in Petrovka 16 May 1946. Was imprisoned.
Loewen, Isaak Anton (b. 29.04.1863) elected 27 December 1900, ordained January 1901, moved to Barnaul 1909, died there of typhus.
Penner, Peter Kornel. (b. 28.02.1854) elected 2 Sept 1901, ordained 15 Sept 1901.
Penner, Peter Johann (b. 15.06.1866) elected 2 Sept. 1901, ordained 8 July 1907.
Dyck, Peter Peter (deacon) (b. 19.06.1874) elected 2 Sept. 1901, ordained 15 Sept. 1901, elected as preacher 7 Sept. 1903, ordained 28 Sept. 1903, emigrated to Canada in September 1926.
Petkau, Dietr. Jak. (b. 3.12.1864) elected 7 Sept. 1903, ordained 28 Sept. 1903.
Janssen, Korn. Jul. (deacon) (b. 10.05.1872) elected 7 Sept. 1903, ordained 28 Sept. 1903, elected as preacher 18 Sept. 1905, ordained Sept. 20 1905, joined the M.B.C. (Mennonite Brethren Church) in 1910.
Petkau, Joh. Jak. (deacon) (b. 1.03.1876) elected 18 Sept. 1905, ordained 8 July 1907.
Giesbrecht, Heinr. Abr. (b. 21.10.1877) elected 26 June 1907, ordained 8 July 1907.
Krahn, Is. Georg (b. 21.10.1882) elected 31 May 1911, ordained 27 June 1911, ordained as Aeltester 29 March 1925, banished to Solovki in 1930 for 10 years.
Loewen, Dav. Heinr. (b. 31.05.1877) elected 31 May 1911, ordained 27 June (?) 1911, died in prison in Tashkent.
Goerzen, Gerhard (deacon) (b. 10.09.1865) elected 31 May 1911, ordained 27 June 1911.
Derksen, Isaak (b. 3.05.1864) elected 6 May 1913, ordained 23 May 1913.
Peters, Joh. Joh. (b. 1888) elected 6 May 1913, ordained 23 May 1913.
Penner, Heinr. Jak., elected 1925, ordained 1925.
Heide, Joh. Nikol. (b. 1890) elected 1925, ordained 1925.
Isaac, Peter (b. 22.06.1860) elected 6 Sept 1903, ordained 9 June 1905, moved to Siberia in the Uralsk region in 1914, still alive in 1925.
Giesbrecht, Jakob Abram
Giesbrecht, Korn. Abr. (b. 1889) elected 1925, ordained August 1926.
Loewen, Peter (No 8), elected in 1925, ordained in August 1926.
Dyck, Abram (No. 1)

b) Nikolayevka Mennonite Church

The Nikolayevka Mennonite congregation was founded in 1897. In order to better serve the widely scattered community, two stations - Stepanovka and Chernoye Osero - were established. It was also decided to start building two churches as soon as possible. Obtaining permission from the authorities was not difficult.

The first prayer house in Stepanovka was consecrated on 13 June 1904. It was built mostly of wood, which significantly shortened construction time. Unfortunately, the house was not to the satisfaction of the congregation. For one thing, it did not look very attractive on the outside, and the interior was not particularly well furnished and equipped. Despite the later interior alterations, the congregation decided to erect a completely new brick building. However, this decision could only be carried out in 1913/14. But now the congregation had a church with which they could be satisfied in every respect. The old prayer house was sold for demolition.

In 1906, a brick prayer house was also built in Chernoye Osero. It looked respectable on the outside and was furnished appropriately on the inside. On October 8, 1906 it was consecrated and given over to its purpose.

Johann Baergmann, the Aeltester of the Nikolayevka congregation, also lived in Chernoye Osero. He was born on 12.12.1866 and elected preacher in 1898. On September 6 of the same year he was ordained, and on June 14th he was ordained as Elder. He had also kept the church books of the parish since 1901.

Peter Dueck, Aliessovo, was ordained as a preacher on 6 September 1898 at the same time as Aeltester Baergmann. He was born on 18.03.1862; in 1926 he emigrated to Canada with all his children and died in 1940 at an advanced age in Coaldale, Alberta.

In addition to the aforementioned, the following preachers served the Nikolayevka congregation: David Litke and Abram Baergmann. They were elected preachers in 1899 and ordained on 8 October of that year. Litke was born on 22.06.1866 and Baergmann on 21.06.1871. Litke lived in Zelyonoye and Baergmann in Chernoye Osero. The latter joined the Mennonite Brethren after his second marriage. He died soon after the famine. Litke emigrated to Canada in the early twenties and settled near Dalmeny in Saskatchewan. He died in 19-- [1942]

On May 30 Heinrich Janzen, Klubnikovo, was inducted into the ministry. He was a very gifted speaker. He was born on 5.11.1864. After about 10 years of ministry, he was baptised into Evangelical Mennonite Brotherhood, in Ukraine but continued to serve as a guest preacher in Orenburg for some time. Later he moved to Siberia and settled in the Barnaul region. There he joined the Mennonite Brethren Church. He also emigrated to Canada and lived first in Manitoba, then in Coaldale and then again in Manitoba.

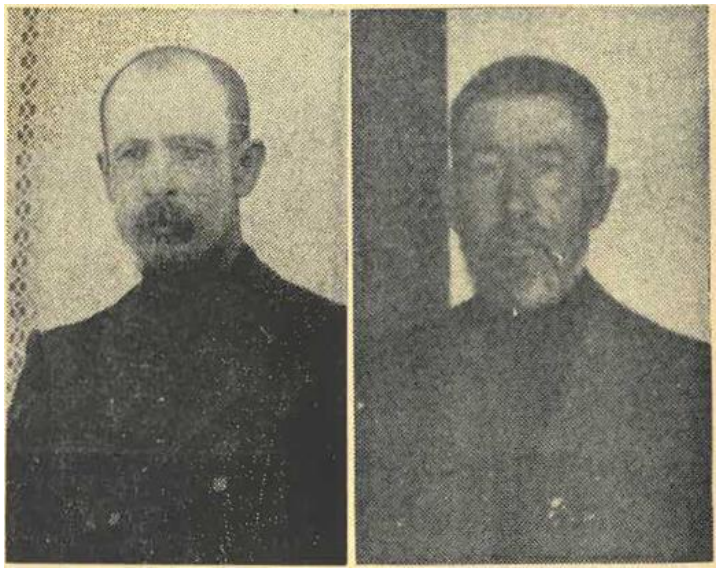
On 3 December 1906 Jakob Wolff, Stepanovka, (b. 4.05.1872) and Heinrich Thiessen (b. 27.07.1874) were ordained as preachers. They were followed on 19 June 1911 by Heinrich Brucks (b. 17.08.1880). He later joined the Mennonite Brethren congregation. About 1925 he emigrated to Canada with his parents-in-law Peter Dueck, Aliessovo. Here the Brucks family initially lived at Coaldale in Alberta, then later moved to British Columbia in the Fraser Valley from there.

In Chernoye Osero, Heinrich Janzen held the office of deacon from 26 December 1906. He was born on 7.01.1863. 19-- he was elected as a preacher and served the congregation as a blessing with the word of God. He was a deep-rooted Christian, which was also testified by his and his family's way of life.

In 1907 the Stepanovka ward also received a deacon, Isaak Derksen (b. 8.03.1862) was entrusted with this office. He lived in Stepanovka.

15 *The Mennonite Brethren Church (M.B.C.)*

a) **Kamenka Station** Rev. Is. J. Toews



Korn. DeFehr, Aelt. of M.B.G. and Rev. Jac. Heide sr., both of Kamenka

The Mennonite Brethren congregation in Orenburg was founded in 1895 as a branch of the M.B.G. in Einlage in the district of Ekaterinoslav (later Dnipropetrovsk). Six years later, on December 17, 1901, the congregation became independent. Its headquarters were in Kamenka, where, by the way, in 1894 only 5 of 41 families belonged to the Brethren congregation, while in 1926 the ratio was reversed: only 6 families belonged to the Mennonite congregation. In 1905 and 1910 the growing congregation was divided into 3 so-called wards: Kamenka, Klubnikovo and Karaguy.

As early as 1900, the congregation, with the strong support of Preacher Fehr, built a sandstone prayer house in Kamenka which was consecrated in the same year. One year later - on 17 July - Preacher Fehr was consecrated as an Elder in this church. Aelt. Fehr served his congregation with great faithfulness and dedication. Whatever he recognised as the spirit of God's word and beneficial to the congregation, he would also carry out. As far as his relationship with the Mennonite congregation was concerned, he kept a strict distance. In 1918, at his request, a preacher was assigned to him to assist him as leader. It became too difficult for him to serve all 3 widely-separated church wards alone. The choice fell on Preacher David Paethkau, Kamenka. Aeltester Fehr continued to serve Stn. Kamenka. At the turn of the year 1919/20, his life's companion succumbed to typhus, and 3 days later he also followed her with the same illness. Both were buried in one grave. Preacher Paethkau was banished in 1931 and will have long since succumbed to the hardships of the far north.

Rev. Jacob Abr. Toews Rev. Isaac J. Toews

While the Mennonite congregation refrained from any missionary activity among the ethnic neighbours, the Brethren congregation was active in missionary work among the Russians from 1918 to 1928. The Russian members of the congregation lived in the neighbouring Russian villages and on the Minin estate. On behalf of the M.B.G., the Russians were baptised by preacher Isaak J. Toews, Kamenka and accepted into the Brethren congregation. Some of these Russian Christians were later banished. One of the baptismal events took place in 1923 at Uran near Kunakbay. All 3 wards of the Brethren congregation took part in it. The congregation choirs took turns, singing Russian songs. Russian sermons were held by the Bible school teacher Jakob Rempel and by preacher Isaak Redekopp. There were also many Russians and Mohammedans present. Today there is no longer a Mennonite Brethren congregation in Orenburg. Six preachers of the congregation - Abr. Teichroeb, Jac. D. Rempel, Gerh. D. Rempel, Isaac D. Redekopp (all from Kantserovka), Aron J. Heyde, Dav. D. Paethkau (Kamenka) and the deacon Abr. D. Rempel, Petrovka, were sent into exile, whereby Br. Teichroeb died already in Orenburg in the prison hospital. Another preacher brother wrote a denial and was released. All the Sunday school teachers, about 15 to 18, and the conductors: Abr. Falk, Kamenka, Bernhard Falk, Kantserovka, and Herman H. Neufeld, Kamenka, had to go the same road of suffering, the latter having perished in exile, while Br. Abr. D. Rempel was allowed to serve as a pastor for his fellow prisoners and was able to baptise 18 people in 1947.

M.B.C. Preachers of Kamenka Station: -
Cornelius A. **Fehr**, Aeltester, ordained 17.7.1901, died of typhoid fever 1920.
Jakob **Heyde**, preacher, ordained 12.9.1901, went to Siberia in 1910.
Jakob A. **Toews**, preacher, ordained 12.9.1901, died of typhoid fever 1920.
Abram P. **Teichroeb**, preacher, ordained 22.5.1904, died of typhoid fever 1920.
Heinrich J. **Esau**, preacher, ordained 1.5.1911, died of typhoid fever 1920.
Peter J. **Esau**, preacher, ordained 28.8.1911, d. nn autumn1923, ill 4 T (?).
Hermann D. **Neufeld**, deacon, ord. 15.6.1895, died 12 May 1922 of typhoid fever.
David D. **Paethkau**, deacon, ordained 1.5.1911.
Johann **Bergen**, deacon, ordained in the autumn of 1918

Isaac J. **Toews**, deacon, ordained in the autumn of 1918.
David D. **Paethkau**, preacher, ordained in the autumn of 1918.
Kornelius **Sawatzky**, preacher, ordained 5.11.1920.
Aron J. **Heyde**, preacher, ordained 5.11.1920.
Isaak J. **Toews**, preacher, ordained 5.11 1920, emigrated to Canada in 1926.
David **Guenther**, preacher, ordained in 1922.
Abram D. **Rempel**, deacon, ordained in the summer of 1924.
Gerhard D. **Rempel**, preacher, ordained 1924.
Jakob D. **Rempel**, preacher, ordained 1924.

Rev. Aron Heyde

b) Klubnikovo Station

Rev. Jakob Friesen, Klubnikovo

The station Klubnikovo of the M.B.G was founded in 1905 and Kamenka attached as a subsidiary. In this station the members of the brotherhood in the villages Aliessovo, Stepanovka, Klubnikovo, Kubanka, Kitchkas, Dolinovka, Radnitchnoye and Dobrovka were grouped together with Klubnikovo as the community centre. In this station, the conservative Chortitzaers and the more liberal Molotschnaers met at the church service, got to know each other and continued to communicate in daily life as well. Thus, barriers were broken. Both sides were winners in this

way and this would soon become visible in cultural and economic ways in community life. Naturally such a union required a great deal of adaptability and the good will to accept a brother as he is.

In 1906, a larger prayer house was built of sandstone in Klubnikovo, which served the congregation for about a quarter of a century. Then, however, the paradoxical situation occurred that the congregation became too small for the large house. With the death of the leading preacher Funk, the prayer house was closed at the instigation of the Soviet authorities. The rest of the congregation had "voluntarily" accepted the government's "proposal" to meet the Kubanka schoolhouse. The former prayer house was now used as a granary for the collective farm.

Leading preachers in the Klubnikovo station: -

Jakob **Friesen**, Kitchkas, until 1911, the year in which his wife died and he decided to return to the South, a decision that was widely regretted by the community and outside it.

Heinrich Heinrich **Kroeger**, Aliessovo, from 1911 until his death in 1921.

He was followed by Peter Peter **Funk**, Kubanka (b. 6.1.1869). He had been a deacon since 1905 and was ordained as a preacher in June 1909.

Rev. H. Kroeger, Klubnikovo

Preachers of Klubnikovo Station: -

Johann Johann **Block**, Dolinovka, since June 1909. He was ordained as a preacher in June 1911, (b. 14.11.1866).

Johann David **Rempel**, Radnitchnoye (b. 2.11.1874). His service began in June 1909. He was ordained together with Johann Block.

David Heinrich **Kroeger**, Kubanka, (b. 28.10.1868). He became deacon the same time as Block and Rempel. Kroeger died almost at the same time as the leading preacher Funk and would be buried on the same day.

Jakob Isaak **Martens**, Radnitchnoye, (b. 14.8.1879). He was called as an evangelist 11.12.1911 and ordained as a preacher September 1912.

Gerhard David **Rempel**, Radnitchnoye, became a preacher in the ___ year. He spoke Russian relatively well and was also active among the Russians as missionary. On behalf of the 3 M.B.C. he organized congregations and assigned preachers to these Russian congregations.

Johann **Schmidt**, Radnitchnoye, deacon (resigned at his own request).

Peter **Redekopp**, Dolinovka and Hermann Neufeld, Dolinovka (formerly Kamenka), deacons.

The old preacher Peter Jakob Peters should not go unmentioned. He was one of the pioneers in Kitchkas and had immigrated from Ukraine. Peters was extraordinarily concerned about the welfare of his congregation. He gladly accepted that there were also sincere children of God in other congregations, even in the Orthodox Church of the Lanctes, even among its clergy. On one occasion he recounted the following experience:

"We were still living in Kharkov. I was on my way to Kharkov. A Russian clergyman was sitting opposite me in the compartment, he also wanted to go to the district. We fell into a conversation. I felt compelled to ask him about his salvation. He was not at all afraid, but willingly answered my question. Soon we felt united in the Lord. The time passed far too quickly and we both regretted being in Kharkov so soon. We would have had so much to say to each other.

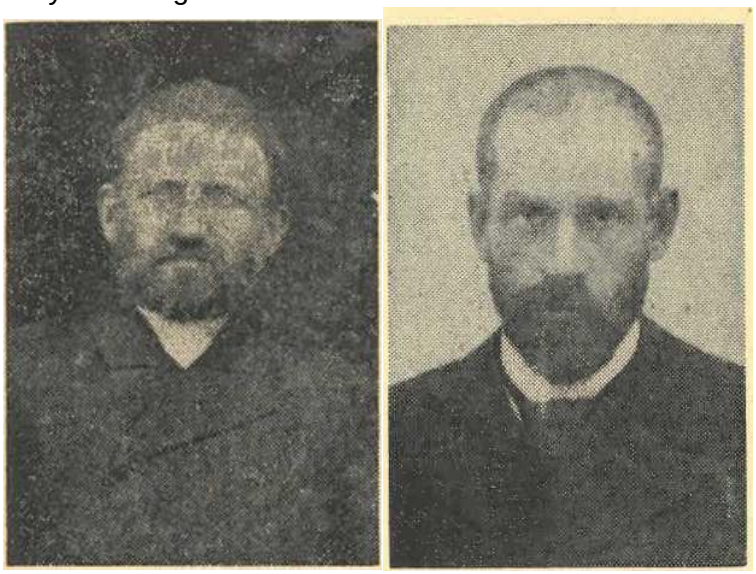
In order to be together even longer, we chose the same hotel and finally took a room there together. Now we were completely undisturbed and we felt the closeness of God very strongly. The prayer fellowship was a blessing for both of us. This Russian papist was a truly born-again Christian.... "

Preacher Peters was born in 1847 and called home in March 1931.

c) Karaguy Station

The Karaguy station was the last of M.B.G. founded in Orenburg. Originally, the Molotschna M.B.G. had its centre in Kamyshovoye, to which the congregation members of all villages belonged. The first preachers were elected in 1898, and a year later the congregation was established as a branch of the Rueckenauer M.B.G., Molotschna. In 1910 Karaguy became a branch of Kamenka.

The first years of the congregation were no easier than those of the sister congregations. In 1899 a meeting house was built in Kamyshovoye that was officially used for Sunday School. The erecting of German churches, specifically for meeting places or places of prayer, was only allowed via official bureaucracy. The Nikolayevka congregation had already received permission to build a house of prayer in Chernoye Osero. According to the regulations of the applicable state laws, the distance between the prayer house and to be so and so many versts. However, the 2 villages mentioned are very close together.



Rev. G. Neufeld; Deacon Cor. Janzen, both of Karaguy

Thus, Karaguy became the third station of the M.B.G. with the villages Suvorovka, Pretoria, Karaguy, Chernoye Osero, Kamyshovoye and Zelyonoye. The meeting house in Kamyshovoye was sold for demolition.

In the early days, church services were held on Sundays and holidays in the mornings and afternoons, filling the whole day. Sunday afternoon belonged to the Sunday school and the youth club. A voice choir has probably always served the congregation. Klaas Ens led the choir until he moved to Siberia around 1908.

Despite the great cold and the not inconsiderable snow storms even the more remote villages of Aliessovo and Zelyonoye were hardly ever absent from church services. This long stay away from home also had some downsides. The family members who stayed behind suffered from being alone, and not least, the cattle in the stable. When a prayer house was also built in Karaguy, Sunday afternoons were kept free as far as possible. Only the Sunday school was kept. For many years, the choir was held in Suvorovka, led first by Abram Pauls, then by Jakob Neufeld, and after he moved to Klubnikovo by his brother Johann Neufeld.

The following brothers served as church leaders, preachers and deacons in this church: -

Wilhelm **Giesbrecht** (b. 1.10.1852), leader from 1898 to 1905.

Jakob **Bergen** (b. 5.11.1845), leader from 1905 to 1909.

Both Giesbrecht and Bergen emigrated.

David **Janz** (b. 10.03.1860), elected preacher 1903, ordained 1907.

Gerhard **Neufeld** (b. 12.10.1858), ordained 12 September 1901

Daniel **Friesen** (b. 22.05. 1870), elected 1902, ordained 1907.

Kornelius **Janzen** (b. 10.05.1872), elected in January 1911 and ordained in September of the same year. He died on a business trip in Samara on 7. 4. 1922.

Martin **Unrau** (b. 4.01.1886), elected deacon in 1911.

Johann **Epp** (b. 8.10.1863), deacon since January 1898. Left the settlement 4 years later and moved to Siberia.

Heier (b. 4.09.1862), elected 1908, ordained 1910.

Abram **Janzen** (b. 27.12.1866), elected as deacon in 1911 and ordained on 13 May 1912.

19-- preacher David **Janz** moved from Sagradovka to Orenburg and settled first in Chernoye Osero and then in Pretoria. He was put in charge of the station in Kamyshovoye and later in Karaguy, where he was also elected elder.

When in 1914/15 (?) the elementary schools in Karaguy and Pretoria were occupied by refugees from Volhynia, the Karaguy station offered the M.B.C. its prayer house for school purposes.

16 *The Bible School*

It was in the early summer of 1923 when the preachers Gerhard Derksen, Karaguy Station, Isaak J. Toews, Kamenka, and Martin K. Unrau, Stn. Klubnikovo met in Dolinovka to discuss the foundation of a Bible School. After all the circumstances had been thoroughly discussed, the 3 decided to found an association which would support the Bible School both ideally and materially. Teaching was to begin as soon as possible. Therefore, it was decided to look for a teacher immediately and also to recruit students.

The 3 then took the matter to their local wards. They were happy to support the work in every way. An association was founded. It consisted of 61 members. Its chairman was Isaak J. Toews, secretary - Peter Paethkau and treasurer - Gerhard Braun, all from Kamenka. The first named are in Canada, and the latter was exiled in 1931 and perished there.

The board of the association decreed Jakob Rogalsky, Crimea, as the first teacher. He was a graduate of the Bible School "Pniel" in Tschongraw, Crimea. In a short time, the first 8 students enrolled, and classes began in October in the house of the G. Derksen family in Karaguy.

The number of students grew very quickly, as did the general interest in the school, even in more distant settlements. In the second year (1924) it was already possible to work with 3 teachers and 47 pupils. The teachers this year were the aforementioned Jakob Rogalsky, Preacher Peter Koehn (Waldheim, Molotschna) and Jakob Rempel, Kantserovka. As the Derksen house was now too small, David Rempel in Kantserovka made his larger house available for the school. In this way two classes could be taught at the same time. The preachers Martin K. Unrau and David Guenther, who now live in B.C., Canada, were also students at the Bible School.

In the 3rd and last school year (1925/26) the same teachers taught 67 students. Since the Rempel house was too small for this large number and the Bible school as such could no longer be held in a private house, it was moved to the prayer house in Kamenka. The students this year came from near and far - from Orenburg, New and Old Samara, from Am Tract, from Siberia, Turkestan and the Crimea, and indeed from all 3 church denominations. "Pniel" had been closed by the authorities and the teachers had emigrated to Canada. In Winkler, Manitoba, "Pniel" was allowed to continue serving.

The Bible School worked for 3 years with visible success. The Soviet authorities made every effort to prevent this. Many Sunday school teachers, preachers of both congregations, deacons and members of the congregation were able to acquire Bible knowledge here, which became a blessing for them and others. They also received the equipment for a better defence before the G.P.U. The 2 teachers Rempel and Rogalsky have been in exile for many years and may not be alive. Preacher Peter Koehn died in 19-- after very difficult experiences in the Caucasus. (See "Menn. Maertyrer", page 291).

The Bible School thrived visibly. Only the Soviet authorities caused difficulties. The "Department for Religious Convictions" of the district administration was responsible. Preacher Toews had to travel to Orenburg again and again because of the school. Once the secretary of the school association, Peter Paethkau, went with him; the other time the leader of the congregation, David D. Paethkau; but mostly Toews travelled alone to the den of the lion.

When Aeltester Paethkau returned home from his trip, he told the congregation: "We must pray much more earnestly for our blessed work. I was surprised that Br. Toews has such a hard time with the authorities in Orenburg, and yet he still dares to go there."

From now on, the teachers and students of the Bible School had a special prayer time every time Rev. Toews went to the city. This was then also felt in Orenburg, especially in the last decisive year. Now the G.P.U. already had their agents on the settlement keeping them informed.

Fortunately, the official with whom Toews generally had to deal was personally sympathetic to him and also to the settlement. It was probably also this "soft hand" that ordered the closure of the Bible School in March 1926. A policeman appeared at Rev. Toews with an arrest warrant and wanted to take him away immediately, but was then content with the promise that the arrested man would join him in 3 days.

Toews was shocked, however, when he no longer found his “friend” in Orenburg and saw a strange face. He was led to another department. Here he was not in front of friends. He was threatened with 5 to 10 years banishment, but was finally released. He reported on that tragedy much later during the meeting of the "Orenburgers" in B.C. in 1946.

“I don't know how I got out of that room where I was dealt with so hard and rough. This much is clear: God held his hand over me and did not leave me in the jaws of the lion...."

Then came a decree in 1926/27 that a Bible school could only be established in the district town - in this case Orenburg. While arrangements were being made for the coming year in Orenburg, Reverend Toews was sent from one authority to another, even to the head of the city. He was received very kindly and questioned with apparent good will, especially by the latter, and then arrested in his own house on 15 March 1926.

The mutual relationship between the two communities should and could have been better. A leading brother of the M.B.C. in C. said to me about 20 years ago: - “Brother D., I have to tell you something; I believe that when things don't work out between the congregations (he meant the M.B.C. and M.C. congregations), it is often due to the congregational leadership.” I fully agreed with this. This fact had not been taken into account by us Orenburgers; unfortunately!

In dealing with this question, I cannot well avoid some anxiety. May God protect me from the spirit of judgement. He is the judge in this too; he alone!

That the "fence" between the M.C. and the M.B.C. was quite high and strong, will have to be admitted by every "Orenburger". This was particularly the case with the Chortitzer of both areas. Which side was more concerned about the high and thick fence, I cannot say. Enough; one thing I have seen, namely: a lot of "weeds" were growing along it; and this fence problem has also put many a stone in the way of fellowship in Christ for our generation.

In early years, the M.C. was much more numerous than the M.B.C. Now, the former regarded the M.B.C. islets in its community with little goodwill and quite a lot of suspicion. It did not like their efforts to expand at the expense of the surrounding area. Without investigating the causes of this phenomenon objectively and getting to the root of it, they resorted to human weapons to defend themselves. They believed they had the right to do so because the other side was using them. As a result, there was no lack of friction, which in one village even degenerated into abuse of the teaching M.B.C. brothers who had come to the village. But in the other villages people were not so "strict". There were also misunderstandings which later dissolved into nothing. One such incident should be mentioned here.

Pretoria was also considered a stronghold of the M.B.C. It had two preachers, Br. Is. Ant. Loewen and myself. Early on the M.B.C. was not represented there. One day Br. A. J. from Suvorovka came to see me. (He was a deacon in the M.B.C.). He asked permission for their travelling preachers to occasionally serve with an evening service here. I went to ask an elder brother and was told that this question would have to be put to the local congregational gathering. I informed Br. A. J. of this. The next Sunday we get the answer from the congregation. It is unanimously - no. We reproach the brethren that we could then be seen as those who fight against God. But they remain defensive. One brother even asks us if we are not bringing God's word to them? - So-no. I tell Br. A. J. about the refusal - but with mixed feelings.

Perhaps a year later, a note from the village leader is sent to the village congregation with the following contents: "Tonight Aelt. Fehr and Rev. Klassen will be serving with God's word in the school." (Br. Kl. was unknown to us). I hurry to Br. L. He is no less surprised. We are a little worried concerning the outcome - but do nothing. Now the winter evening envelops Pretoria in its dark blanket. I am worried about the embarrassment, because I am convinced that the house will be empty. Eventually I make my way to the school to somehow mitigate the embarrassing situation. No matter how hard I look around, no one is to be seen. But there is light in the school hall. I hear talking. There must be a few people here. Now I open the door and see a full house, and the sermon has already begun. I quickly take a seat in the back among the audience. It is a blessed gathering. - Thank God!

But the conscious decision?! Did the brothers only want to do us a "favour" back then when we cancelled. And how do we preachers look now? What will the brothers think of us now? At the next preachers' meeting we agreed that an ordained preacher of the M.B.C. should not be denied the simple right to speak (without private intentions, of course); but where a preacher lived in the village an announcement of a planned service should come from him. In any case, names of the respective teaching brothers and their congregational affiliation were to be indicated. This is how it continued to be handled and thus a mutual approach was attempted in all weakness. It did not come to the point of mutual invitations for the purpose of preaching God's word, and the weeds continued to grow - unfortunately! Less conspicuous, but still poisonous.

Under these circumstances, the Deyevka M.C. was even suspicious of a Bible School as such, because it was supposed to be an M.B.C. institution. The situation was similar with the home visits for the purpose of pastoral care. By the way, the D.M.C. was not without pastoral care, but it was carried out as unobtrusively as possible by private visits of the preachers and deacons. Much, by the way, was based on ignorance; but many blessings were lost. - An example: During the First War, when the Lord laid pastoral care of home visits to all on the soul of Br. J. Peters, and he prayerfully began it after about a year, - the tension was not small. In one village it sounded quite worrying. But by the end of the tour, the dust had settled and I was told later in one house: "There was nothing bad. He read a word of scripture, explained it and prayed with and for us" - They had nothing against that.

God responded to this ministry in some villages with very gratifying revivals. But the success would have been much greater if all the teaching brethren of the D.M.G. had been more involved in prayer and action.

Over the years, the brusqueness of the opposites faded more and more. But the concern about the inviolability of the deliberate "fence" remained until the red storm began to tear it down quite irreverently and connected both sides due to the reality of it. Apart from a few exceptions, the "Molotschna" were less concerned about differences than the "Chortitzer".

I must also mention an earlier "breakthrough" in the latter group. Missionary Unruh from the Baptist mission field in India, in which the M.B.C. were also involved, also visited the M.B.C. stations in Orenburg. Some of his listeners from Pretoria were in Klubnikovo. When the brother offered to serve externally, if invited, Pretoria invited him. There was a very blessed evening with a collection of about 300 roubles. A rather conservative elderly lady contributed about 60%.

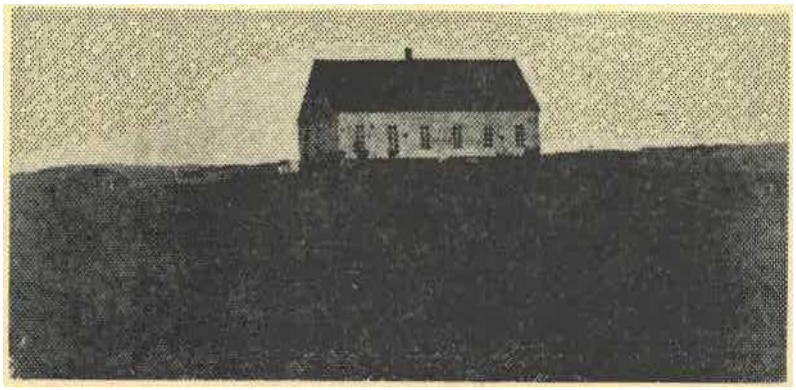
Looking back on the zeal of our own church that time, - we must confess that we paid far too little attention to John 21:15-17 - What is the situation between us today? Is Christ alone - only HE - the goal of our striving in church life?

IV Growing school spirit

***17** Primary schools* by Dr. W. Quiring

When these colonists moved to Orenburg, the dead spot in the Mennonite school system in the Ukraine had already been overcome. The modern, progressive direction had prevailed there. The viewpoint that the Bible, hymnal and catechism alone were sufficient as aids in the school was considered to be overcome. Most of the Mennonite schools in the mother colonies were already working according to a fixed curriculum at the turn of the century, the workload as well as the school hours were sensibly divided up and the children were taught according to textbooks, some of which were written by Mennonite authors and some came from Germany. The pedagogical classes in Chortitza and Halbstadt contributed to this healthy development.

In any case, the young new settlers generally brought with them a healthy attitude towards school and education, and right from the very first difficult years they also turned their attention to schools. Initially, schooling took place in the small "major" rooms of private houses, but already in the 4th and 5th year of settlement, school buildings were erected, mostly of natural stone and roofed with wood or tin. It was noticeable that the part of the settlement inhabited by the Old Colonists built large, airy and bright schools, while the Molotschna part was content with usual settlement houses. The Molotschna group never caught up with the Chortitza group in this building difference, but otherwise the schools in the whole settlement were almost on the same level.



Primary school in Dobrovka

Fortunately, at the beginning of this century, a few pedagogical educated teachers who were to lead and set the tone in school matters in the settlement for many years. These were Isaak G. Krahn, Kantserovka, David H. Loewen, Deyevka, Johann B. Mathies, Karaguy, and others. At monthly the teachers' conference meetings, teaching samples were given and all professional questions were discussed.

The relationship between the village communities and the teachers was generally one of trust, even though the way in which they were appointed put a great strain on this relationship. The teachers were "rented" for a period of one year at the request of both parties, which meant a precarious existence and a hand-to-mouth existence for the teachers for the rest of their lives. In this mode of engagement, it sometimes happened that the village communities snatched away a teacher who was known to be good by overbidding for him.

The salary amounted to 350-650 rubles a year, part of which was generally paid in kind, mostly in wheat. A teacher also had to "look after" the school, heat the 2 large ovens with dried dung and sweep and wash the large classrooms.

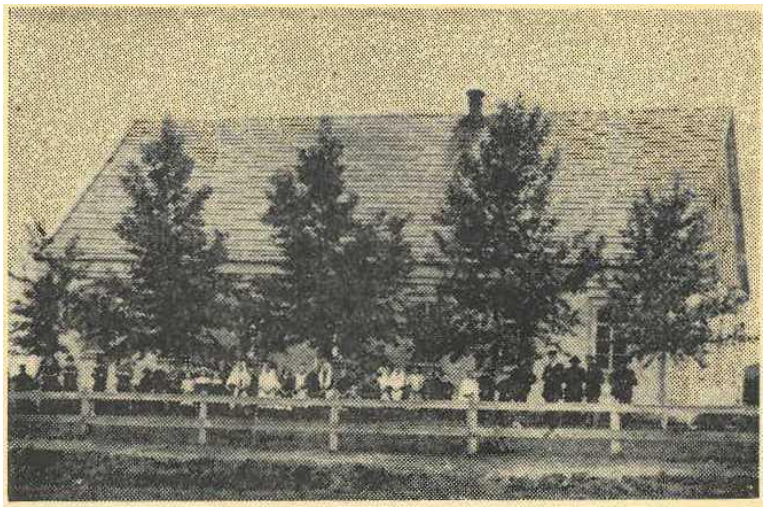
Compulsory schooling, which had been introduced in Mennonite settlements of Ukraine, was retained by the settlers. School attendance began at the age of 7 and ended at the age of 13 for girls and 14 for boys.

School in Radnitchnoye, built in 1901

The schools were maintained entirely by the settlers themselves. The interest of the peasants in the affairs of their school was generally lively, even if it occasionally manifested itself in nagging and wanting to know better. Since the teacher was "leased" every year, he was in every way invested in the good opinion and goodwill of his village community. But not always, unfortunately, and not everywhere were the parents just or even insightful. This was not always the case with the teachers either. The teacher was always made aware that he was an employee of the whole village. However, every village probably had one or more special friends of the school or of the teacher. They were always open to good advice from the teacher or other stimulus and always knew how to balance out between the individual dissatisfied person and the teacher. It was precisely these farmers, who were open to the school, who contributed a great deal to the improvement of the school system in general. Most of the preachers and deacons were also friends of the school. They were able to understand the teacher so well because they themselves were in public service and were dependent on the goodwill of the parishioners.

A teacher's salary was partly dependant on the number children, a large part (generally half) was transferred to the landowners which meant a fairer balance of social burdens.

Children, who had completed their schooling, were only sporadically sent on to higher education in Ukraine in the first 15 years of settlement. In 1905 Isbrandt J. Krueger from Nikolayevka (now in St. Catharines, Ontario) went to Chortitza, and returned to the settlement after finishing his pedagogical classes.



School in Dolinovka

After the First World War, the schools experienced a strong boost of young teachers returning from the field. With few exceptions all the teachers in the settlement were graduates of the Central School [*Zentralschule*] in Pretoria. They were in charge of the school department of the Volost, led the teachers' association and also created two "Associations for the Betterment of Education", one in Klubnikovo and another in Pretoria. The educational association in Klubnikovo brought together a lending library of over 4000 volumes by 1920. About 3000 of these books were bought by German nationals returning to Germany, and the library of Jakob Enns consisting of a few hundred volumes in Feodorovka was acquired, while the rest were collected at the settlement level. The library had its headquarters in Klubnikovo, from where mobile libraries were sent to the villages and generally administered there by the teachers. The Pretoria Association had also established a library of several hundred volumes.

Peter Sudermann, teacher in Petrovka 1900-1905

In 1919/20, 12 of the primary schools (Kitchkas, Pretoria, Dobrovka, Dolinovka, Radnitchnoye, Deyevka, Romanovka, Petrovka and Kamenka) were converted into dual-level schools, with former Zentralschule pupils also being installed here.

A group photo of Orenburg teachers:

1. Schellenberg; 2. Peter Isaak sr.; 3. Fr. Froese; 4. Peter P. Sawatzky; 5. Franz F. Lehn; 6. Joh. Friesen; 7. Dav. Guenther; 8. A. Baerg; 9. Is. Kroeger; 10. D. Loewen; 11. H. Brucks; 12. Joh. Petkau; 13. Joh. Matthies; 14. Jacob Brucks; 15. Joh. Dyck, C. Eckert; 17. Derksen; 18. ?

18 *Zentralschulen*

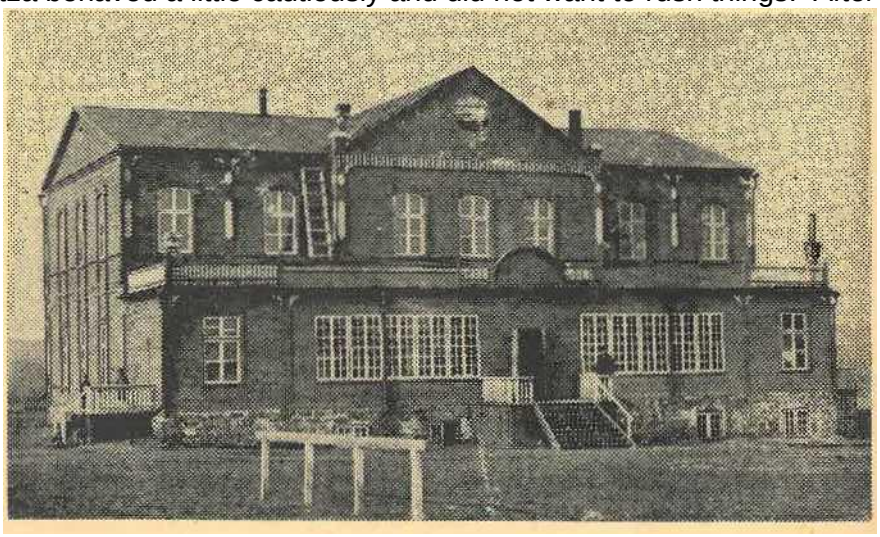
The question of the Zentralschule [secondary school] was a matter of concern for a number of far-sighted men from quite early on. It was caused by the great shortage of teachers. Because the demand for well-equipped young teachers did not diminish even in the old homeland, we were almost always left behind. Only very seldom was a successful graduate of the pedagogical - later teacher training seminar -classes there willing to come to us after passing the teacher's examination. We lacked many things in all areas - but especially in the school system.

However, it was extremely rare for a boy from Orenburg who was eager to learn to get there even though the mother colonies were very accommodating with free placements in the schools and other necessary care. Parents feared, not without reason, that their sons would become alienated from their parents' home and their poor home community during the long absence (5 to 6 years, because the limited means did not allow them to return home for the summer holidays).

We recognised this need more and more clearly and sought a remedy through our own training school. The danger of alienation during these studies in the teacher training colleges was already much less among these latter graduates.

In order to manage with as few resources as possible, we planned a two-class school with a four-year course. Students were to be admitted every second year. This was the situation in Chortitza until 1890.

So far everything went well; but then came the question of space. Deyevka was considered the centre of the Chortitza settlers who lived in 14 villages. There was also the idea of proceeding separately with Mother Chortitza and not take into account our sister settlement - But Mother Chortitza behaved a little cautiously and did not want to rush things. After all, it was



Zentralschule in Pretoria

a big undertaking. Deyevka itself lacked the awareness that such an undertaking would also require sacrifices on its part, not only accumulate "increased income and savings"; nor was there a suitable plot of land. Only one site seemed to come into question, and that was intended for the future church and had already been bought and paid for. The accommodation of the pupils would also have been difficult, because spacious houses with wooden floorboards were still scarce. In the neighbouring Romanovka it was no better. This and other factors severely

weakened Deyevka's candidacy. Pretoria now put up its candidature. It had some advantages in regards to the question of space and accommodation, but was situated at the very south end of the Chortitza villagers, but in relation to the whole settlement (including the Molotschna) not less favourable than D. In addition, P. committed himself by a municipal decree not to take more than 6 rubles per month per the pupil for board and lodging for 10 years

That Chortitza, Halbstadt and Gnadenfeld would act together in this matter was not to be expected in the foreseeable future. Wait patiently? Our youth feared that they would then become too old and pushed forward with all their might. The fathers finally had to give in. An association came into being which made it its duty to found and maintain secondary schooling. From our rather empty pockets we looked up to our rich father - and from him to our wealthy mothers and sisters.

The villages actually in the middle of the whole settlement - Kitchkas, Kubanka and Klubnikovo - did not cooperate on the question of space. Kitchkas perhaps remained silent out of consideration for Deyevka; it was also considerably smaller than Pretoria, and the nearest village was two miles away. In Kubanka and Klubnikovo there was a lack of interest in competing for space. There was also a lack of suitable housing to accommodate pupils. So, the school came to Pretoria. Karaguy, half a mile from Pretoria, with its spacious houses, also contributed a lot to this decision.

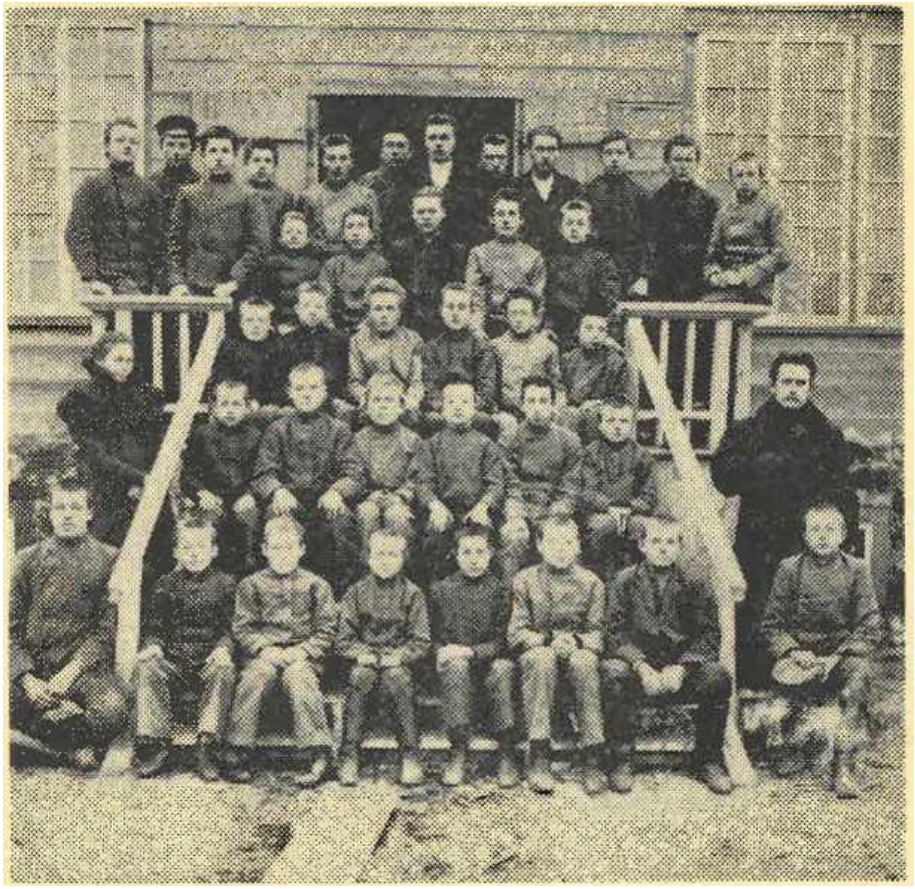
It was a great pity that the leaders could not be objective enough, which caused a serious shock to the Deyevka community. Fortunately, it was spared from an intended split.

Under such circumstances, the "Association for the Improvement of Education" (Obschtschestwo podjoma obrasowanija) was born on 1 March 1907 and registered in the Orenburg District Chancellery. The school authorities also welcomed our project. (Note from the publisher: - The driving force of this school association was the merchant and preacher P. P. Dyck. He provided the school with the greatest moral and financial support, as evidenced by the figures listed at the end of the chapter.)

"A" was started, and the rest had to follow. A lot had to be done before autumn, because then the classes were to begin. Members were found. They came only sporadically. Some school friends took a wait-and-see attitude because they did not really trust the young association and partly so as not to spoil things with their opposition. It was different with the future pupils and their desire to learn. A rather impoverished pair of teachers, Mr. Rudolf Riesen, graduate of the high school in Vojsk on the Volga, and his wife of Russian nationality, also teacher, dared to make a start with us.

Because the school building could not be finished in time, lessons began in the "great" room of the older Wilhelm Loewen siblings. Riesens were housed in their good adjoining cottage.

Since the students were already more or less mature young men and devoted to their studies with great zeal, the work progressed well beyond expectation - despite a great lack of teaching and visual aids. Unfortunately, teacher Riesen suffered from a chest ailment. He fell ill with a cold (perhaps it was the flu), and when things seemed to be getting better, a haemorrhage brought his young life to an end. That was in March.



The first two classes of Pretoria Zentralschule.

1st row from top, left to right: Fr. Guenther; Quiring; Jk. Grunau; Jh. Goerz; Jk. Matthies; Jh. Dyck; Hm. Froese; Bernh. Vocht; Jk. Kliewer; Jk. Ekkert; Peter Jk. Fast

2nd row from the top: Dan. Peters; Jh. Guenther; Jh. Pries; Peter Klassen; Dan Wiebe; Jk. Wolff

3rd row: D. Bergmann; Franz Penner; Dav. Rempel; Dav. Koehn; P. Epp; Mich. Koxtunov

2nd row from bottom: J. Krahn; Ger. Neufeld; Korn. Matthies; Korn. Janzen; Wilh.Herdt; Gus. Schmiedgal;

Bottom row: Phil. Oertel; Heinr. Spenst; Jk. Toews; Fritz Schmiedgal; Joh. Friesen; Hr. Braun; Korn Giesbrecht; Dav. Koslowsky

Teachers: Frau von Riesen and Franz Lehn

We were all deeply shocked. Should God be against this undertaking? Closure? But the pupils wanted to continue learning and the widowed Mrs. Riesen, together with her brother, also a teacher and a cripple, offered to continue the work. The only thing missing was a teacher for religion and German. Finally, I took over these subjects until the end of the school year. In this way, the school ship, which had been listing so much, could be brought some balance.

At the end of the not-easy school year, we were able to ascertain that the sacrifices made had not been in vain. We were pleasantly astonished by the willingness of the students to learn.

Yes - the Lord has also given grace' - was our grateful certainty. The association had also grown in membership and courage, especially in courage, almost too much. Our mother and sister congregations in the old homeland had lifted us up by their benevolent encouragement and

rich financial contributions. We were particularly pleased that the vast majority there approved of the founding of the school association.

Another 30 boys asked to be admitted the next autumn (1908) and made our two-class plan unfeasible. However, because our school building, which had not yet been completed, only had room for 2 classes and 2 teachers' flats, we decided to add another 2 classes together with a library, laboratory and teachers' room. With God's help and that of our friends, we managed to get over this mountain much more easily than we had dared to hope. Aeltester Johann Baergmann consecrated the school for its service, and the second school year began with 2 well-populated classes and 2 teachers. Mrs. Riesen remained at her post and Franz Lehn, teacher, Romanovka, took over the remaining subjects. Their service was quite successful.

It was a special joy for the association that the resistance began to weaken, and students from among the leading opponents joined us, and even some of their fathers joined our association. How happy we were to have followed the advice of Romans 12, 21.

After the end of the school year, Lehn travelled to Dorpat during the summer months to improve his German; which he did. Mrs. Riesen resigned. Now we were 2 teachers short because a third class was to be opened. They were given to us. Dietrich Jak. Goosen, a university student from Mennonite circles, took over the post of school principal also teaching the missing subjects, and a Little Russian [Ukrainian] Ilya Osipovich Lasty96Susuenko with city school teaching credentials, taught secondary level courses. In this year too, were enough students. The work was able to proceed successfully for a further year despite some gaps in the physics department and the like.

Unfortunately, Teacher Gossen left us to attend the University in Moscow. However, a replacement was found. Peter P. Sawatzky, graduate of the teacher institute in St. Petersburg, accepted our invitation to teach and take over principal duties. Franz Fr. Froese also accepted our invitation to teach. He had attended Chernayevich university courses in St. Petersburg. All were joyful workers. The elder in this quartet was Lehn. Teachers and pupils knew they were connected and strived together towards their goal.

D.J. Goosen, Zentral teacher

Vasyli Pavlovich Pankratyev and spouse, both Zentral teachers

In this year (1910/11) the first class finished the school with very good results. Three of them, Johann Guenther, Jakob Quiring and Jakob Grunau then entered the Chortitza teacher training college. They held their ground. Grunau died there of typhoid fever; - we had very high expectations of him. "Man thinks, and God directs." Of the remaining graduates, some took part in teacher training courses, others prepared themselves for the teaching profession through private lessons in order to become useful to our people (and also non-Mennonites) in the school system1910/11 was also quite successful other three classes

Then came 1911/12 which brought a very weak harvest. Where do we go from here? Will there be students? Where will the funds for board, lodging, school fees, books and the like come from? The members of the association are not in a position to pay extra in addition to their membership fees. Savings must be made, but where? Teacher Lastyenko left voluntarily and got a job as a teacher in Batum. The other three teachers offered to take over all 4-year studies if there were beginners. But the budget still wasn't sufficiently covered. - Our friends in the South? No chance! They will have to give our settlement a lot of support any way, in order to prevent a serious catastrophe. There were sleepless nights. - "We'll dare anyway and beg for assistance," some members of the association pleaded. They were finally allowed to go in order to leave no stone unturned, to stay above water. Our prayers accompanied them of course. The surprise and joy were therefore not small when our patrons came to our aid in a big way. We were deeply touched. Oh, how we (teachers, pupils and members of the association) would have liked to personally thank each donor for their help. It happened in spirit and they were lovingly remembered in our prayer chambers. Beginners also came in sufficient numbers. Before the start of the school year, a fourth teacher, Vasyli Pavlovich Pankratyev, could be employed, and the lessons began again at full steam.

Pretorian Zentralschule teachers: Fr. Lehn, F F. Froese, Ilya Josifovich Lastyenko and P.P. Sawatzky.

In 1912/13, to our delight, there was no change of teachers and the school was now at the peak of this period of its existence.

In 1913/14 the teachers Sawatzky and Froese left the school, accepting more favourable offers. Mrs Pankratyeva, Anfusa Ivanovna - also a good teacher - stepped into a gap, and the other gap was filled by one Akim Vasilyevich Belosyorov. He was from St. Petersburg and took over Russian language lessons.

In 1914/15, Teacher Lehn also left us, following the call to Spat in the Crimea. Teacher Langemann was found to replace him. He had studied theology abroad and was a preacher. We expected a lot from him.

Then, in August, the war broke out - the First World War - and drew a thick X through our plans. Langemann became a medic and Pankratyev had to don an officer's uniform. Good advice was hard to come by. Only Mrs. Pankratyeva was still at our service. Finally, we got hold of a woman with a university education, Lise Petrovna Dyck from the Ukraine, and an older teacher, Romanovsky, and I had to substitute for Br. Langemann. After about a month, I fell quite ill with tonsilitis and did not take up work again. The three colleagues did their best to keep our little school afloat, which succeeded until the end of the school year. However, heavy forebodings surrounded us!

Already in the summer, the authorities ordered us to close the school and to liquidate our association because it "represented German interests". This happened without hesitation on our part. As I had become the main creditor through various contributions and had also co-signed for a 2000-ruble loan for the association, everything was bequeathed to me. My balance at that time was about 9 to 10 thousand rubles. Then, by order of the police, German civilian prisoners moved into the school building. Their number averaged around a hundred, more or less. We occupied a teacher's flat to reorganize in. The books and equipment were packed away and taken to a safe place, and our "Sleeping Beauty" fell asleep for 3 years, but nevertheless aged rapidly under the changed circumstances. The hot water boiler leaked after about a year and brick ovens had to be installed. They were heated with straw because fuel dung became scarce and too expensive. Time became quite long or us.

In 1917, the house could finally be cleared out. This was already under the "temporary government" of Kerensky. New hopes revived us. In the winter of 1917/18, we got our own regional administration under the name "Uranskaya Volosty" [Uranian district]. The government wanted to buy the house for demolition (it was a wooden building) and with the wood build a hospital about 40 versts away. I refused the offer, but informed our U.G. (Uraner Gebiet- Uran district) board and offered them the whole property for school purposes. My conditions were: the price is 13000 rubles without down payment. This sum is to be paid later in revalued money, if possible, to my creditors (in Poland and Germany) with a low interest rate. (I had not been able to make my payments due in autumn of 1914 because the war front was there. The cash that remained in my hands as a result had in the meantime been affected by the devaluation of money, the end of which was not in sight. Now this agreement was supposed to secure my creditors as much as possible, because all 22 villages would then be behind it). The board of directors and their associates agreed to my offer, and the district assembly gladly accepted it. Thus, our agreement came into effect, and the house and its furnishings became the complete property of the U. District.

Some necessary repairs were made. Repairs were made and, in the autumn of 1918, after a three-year break, school work began again under the care of our regional office. The first teachers were Rev. David H. Loewen, David H. Koslowsky and Dimitry F. Moshkevich, an older

teacher of Russian nationality. For the year 1919/20 the latter's son, Sergei D. Moshkevich, was added.

In 1920/21 Br D. H. Loewen and Moshkevich jr. resigned. Joining us were: - Br. Franz F. Klassen. (a graduate of the commercial school in Halbstadt), Professor Alexander Sacharovich Marovsky, his wife Elena Petrovna and her sister Marja Petrovna Lebedeva - both university educated and all Muscovites.

Except for Moschkevich sr., all remained as teachers also in 1921/22. The dear reader will probably ask: "How was that possible?" Well, food was quite scarce Moscow that time. Also, the dear people had the misfortune to belong to the aristocracy and had already had to go through very hard times. This drove them into our quiet corner, where white bread and other foodstuffs for the table were still available. They taught for food, so to speak. That is why the Uran district could afford such teaching staff.

For 1922/23, the teachers Klassen and Koslowsky left the school; the latter to continue his studies. The Muscovites stayed another year, and 2 Kirbatyevs (probably brothers) joined them. All of "our" teachers were gone, - the German and religion classes too, of course.

In 1923/24 the Muscovites also left. (The "New Economic Policy" allowed everything to breathe again.) Only the two Kirbatyevs were willing to stay. Two from Muntau in the south, Johann Heinrich Dyck and Heinrich Joh. Barg, and a Heinrich Albrecht from "Neu-Samara" let themselves be recruited. But Barg stayed only 1 year. He was replaced by an "Orenburger", Jakob Johann Hildebrandt from Dolinovka during the school year 1924/25. Then Dyck also resigned. - In 1925/26 an older teacher, Johann Bernh. Matthies (also from Orenburg), took his place, so that in addition to the two Kirbatyevs there were still 3 German teachers.

I didn't have much contact with the 1918 newly built school because we no longer lived in Pretoria. The information provided about this period comes mainly from others and especially from students of those years who had the good fortune to come to Canada.

In 1919/20, 2 more schools of secondary education were opened on the settlement, one in Klubnikovo under the direction of Dietrich D. Bergmann and the other in Deyevka, which was led by a Russian teacher, Korobov

List of teachers who worked in the central schools.

PRETORIA -

1907/08	Riesen, R. A. and Riesen , Sin. Gr. Evenings III after Riesen's death - P.P. Dyck
1908/09	Lehn, Franz Fr. and Riesen, Sin. Gr.
1909/10	Lehn, Franz Fr.;Lastyenko, II. Jos.; Gossen, Dietrich Jak.
1910/11	Lehn, Franz Fr.;Lastyenko, II. Jos.; Sawatzky, P.P.; Froese Fr.Fr.
1910/11	Lehn, Franz Fr.; Pankratjev, Vas. Pawl.; Sawatzky, P. P.; Froese, F. F.
1912/13	Lehn, Franz Fr.; Pankratyev, V.P.; Sawatzky, P.P.; Froese Fr.Fr.
1913/14	Lehn, Franz Fr.; Pankratyev, V.P.; Pankratyeva, Anfusa Iw., Belosyorov, Akim Vasil.
1914/15	P.P. Dyck (1 month); Miss Dyck, Liese; Pankratyeva, Anfusa Iw.; Romanowsky.
1918/19	Loewen, D.H.; Koslowsky, D.H.; Moshkevich, Dimitr. Feodor.
1919/20	Loewen, D. H.; Koslowsky, D. H.; Moshkevich, Dim. Feodor; Moshkevich, Sergey Dimitr.
1920/21	Klassen, Fr. Fr.; Koslowsky, D.H.; Marovsky, Alex. Sakhar.; Marovskaya, Hel Petrovna; Lebedeva, Marya Petr.; Moshkevich Dim. F.

1921/22 Klassen, Fr. Fr.; Koslowsky, D. H.; Marovsky, Alex. Sakhar.; Marovskaya, Hel. Petrovna; Lebedyeva, Marya Petr.
1922/23 Kirbatjev, Kiril Serg.; Kirbatiev, Stepan Serg.; Marovsky, Alex. Sakh.; Marovskaya, Hel. Petrovna; Lebedeva, Marya Petr.
1923/24 Kirbatjev, Kir. Serg.; Kirbatjew, Stepan Serg.; Dyck Johann Heinr.; Barg, Joh. Heinr.; Albrecht, Heinrich.
1924/25 Kirbatjev, Kiril Serg; Kirbatiev, Stepan Serg; Dyck, Joh. Heinr.; Hildebrandt, Jak. Joh.; Albrecht, Heinr.
1925/26 Kirbatjev, Kiril Serg; Kirbatiev, Stepan Serg; Matthies, Joh. Bern; Hildebrandt, Jak. Joh; Albrecht, Heinrich.
Further unknown.

DEYEVKA -
1920/21 Korobow; Penner, Is. Pet.
1921/22 Korobow; Koslowsky, David Heinr.
1922/23 Korobow; Koslowsky, David Heinr.; Svonov.

KLUBNIKOVO -
1918/19 Bergmann, Dietrich
1919/20 Bergmann, Dietrich; Barg, Abr. Heinr.; Dinse, Olimp. Viktorow.
1920/21 Bergmann, Dietrich; Barg, Abr. Heinr.; Dinse, Ol. Vikt.
1921/22 Bergmann, Dietrich
1922/23 Bergmann, Dietrich
1923/24 Bergmann, Dietrich

V Administration

19 *Management*

The administration of the settlement was similar to that of the south. The village was overseen by the mayor along with two landowners, also the fire marshal, the head shepherd and the administrative secretary. In addition, there were one or two so-called (in Russian) *desjatniki* who dealt with the point system. They were all elected for one year. The settlement, on the other hand, was administered by the head mayor [District Mayor or *OberSchulze*], the head fire marshal and the Orphans Administration.

In order to distribute the various community jobs equally among all the properties, a point system familiar from the old country was also set up here. Every service for the village - cartage, ploughing for the teacher, clearing the schoolyard of ashes, etc. - was valued and "remunerated" with a certain number of points. All property owners were equally obliged to participate. At the end of the year all points were added up and divided by the number of properties. Those who had more than the average were credited with the surplus. Those who were in arrears had to make up for it the next year or purchase points. The value was not always the same every year nor in every village. It fluctuated according to demand or supply. By the way, not only were there villages with this point system, but also districts or Volost that used them.

In the Chortitza villages, the first head mayor was Reverend Dietrich Lepp, Deyevka. He was appointed to this office by the Chortitza mother colony. Ohm Lepp came to Orenburg in 1893 and wintered on the Uran estate, later Dobrovka. But his time of service was short. Already in the autumn of 1894 he was elected as a preacher, and the office of head mayor was given to Mr. Joseph Friesen, Deyevka. He was the son of the well-known so-called "Russian" Friesen; one of the most learned men in the Mennonite world at that time. But his effectiveness lay outside the boundaries of Mennonite world. Incidentally, Joseph Friesen also surpassed the average level on the settlement quite significantly. Unfortunately, he devoted himself exclusively to his own business, a machine shop and had no contact with the community or his neighbours. A few years after the Bolsheviks came to power he moved to Tashkent, where he died in 19-- .

Joseph Friesen was succeeded as head mayor in about 1899 by an older farmer, David Froese, Deyevka. Froese came from Schoeneberg in the old colony, and was the brother of Johann Froese, who was at the time the head mayor in Chortitza. Froese remained in office until 1905(?).

The head mayor was actually a representative of Chortitza (the mother colony) on the settlement of Orenburg. Above all, he had to represent the interests of Chortitza and at the same time look after the welfare of the settlement. Sometimes it may have been difficult to reconcile the interests of both parties. That such an institution could not necessarily satisfy the settlers is understandable, and serious consideration was given to elect their own representative from amongst themselves, who would then only have to address the interests of the settlement. But the mother colony wisely intervened. From then on, the settlement was allowed to elect a head mayor from among themselves, who was then confirmed by Chortitza in the south. Of course, even this arrangement left a lot to be desired, but in this way at least a man came to the helm who was agreeable to the whole settlement.

Froese's successor was the merchant Anton Guenther in Dobrovka. With him, they had chosen a man with a broad outlook, prudence and great work ethic. He really was an advocate of the settlement, without in any way neglecting the interests of the mother settlement. Guenther served the settlement from 1906 to 1911 to the general satisfaction and benefit of the community. His successor, Isaak Penner of Dolinovka, was then in office for another two years. In 1913 the

people from Chortitza in Orenburg were granted title to their land and thus became independent of the old colony.

The administration of the Molotschna half of the settlement would also be similar. The first head mayor there was Bernhard Matthies, Karaguy, who was active from 1895 to 1899. He was followed by Abram Fast, Stepanovka (1899-1907), his successor was Johann Spenst, Chernoye Osero (1907-1917).

However, the Mennonite leaders were not authorised to communicate with the Russian authorities, because administratively the Chortitza part was under the settlement of the Bashkir Volost Kipchakskaya in Akhmerevo and the Molotschna part partly under the Abramovskaya Volost in the Russian village of the same name.

20 Uran Volost

When in 1917 the Bolsheviks began to dissolve all traditional order, the people of Orenburg felt that the time had come to break away from the volosts of Kipchakskaya and Abramov. This solution did not cause any particular difficulties, and in the winter of 1917 the whole settlement of 25 villages united to form a separate volost. It was named after the river Uran which flows through the middle of it.

Kitchkas became the seat of the volost. It which is located approximately in the centre of the settlement. Immediately, a permanent volost secretary was hired. Heinrich H. Loewen, Kamenka, was appointed to this post. The first chairman of the volost was Jakob W. Pries, Pretoria (or Eidzen, Suworowka?)

The parliament of the settlement, the territorial or volost assembly, was called S'chod [pronounced S-chod – local or municipal parliament or government] in Russian. Each village elected one (or two?) representatives, a S'chodman, who had to attend the periodic volost assemblies. Only now could the whole settlement be properly administered and successfully represented to the outside world.

According to the Bolshevik regulations in force, the volost had to set up a number of "departments". This was done, but the "otdjele" never became active. Only the department for education (schkoljnej otdjel) proved to be appropriate, and it worked for the benefit of the settlement for years. Its first director was Heinrich A. Bock, Deyevka, its second Jakob A. Wolff, Deyevka.

In the chaos - the countless plundering, "requisitions", mobilisations, etc., - that began in 1917, the volost proved to be an indispensable authority that was of great benefit to the settlement and saved it from much harm. Both parts of the settlement now proceeded together in all matters and soon realised that unity really does make one strong.

The fire regulations of insurance of the settlement had been adopted from the mother colonies in the south. The chief fire administrator in the Molotschna part of the settlement was Franz Penner, Karaguy. The rules for fire insurance were somewhat different for the Molotschna people than for those from Chortitza. Molotschna people, had to pay the premiums in advance and from it the reserve capital was built up for emergencies. The Chortitza people only determined the amount of the premium after a fire loss. Both insurance funds functioned well; initially as branches of their parent colonies in Ukraine. When arson in the south got out of hand, Orenburg broke away from the mother colony. For a long time, J. Nickel, Feodorovka, was the Chortitza fire marshal.

Each of the settlements also had an orphan's or guardian’s administration, the principles of which, however, were not quite the same. The difference was probably that guardians from Molotschna had significantly more rights in the administration of the minors’ assets than someone from Chortitza had (assets of the orphans seemed to be safer from loss). The orphan's administration was also a branch of the orphan's administration of the mother colonies. Klaas Heide, Petrovka, served as the orphan’s administrator on the Chortitza side, at first by himself but later an assistant was assigned to him, namely Isaak Penner, Dolinovka. The work of the orphans’ administration began around the turn of the century.

VI 21 Industry and Trade

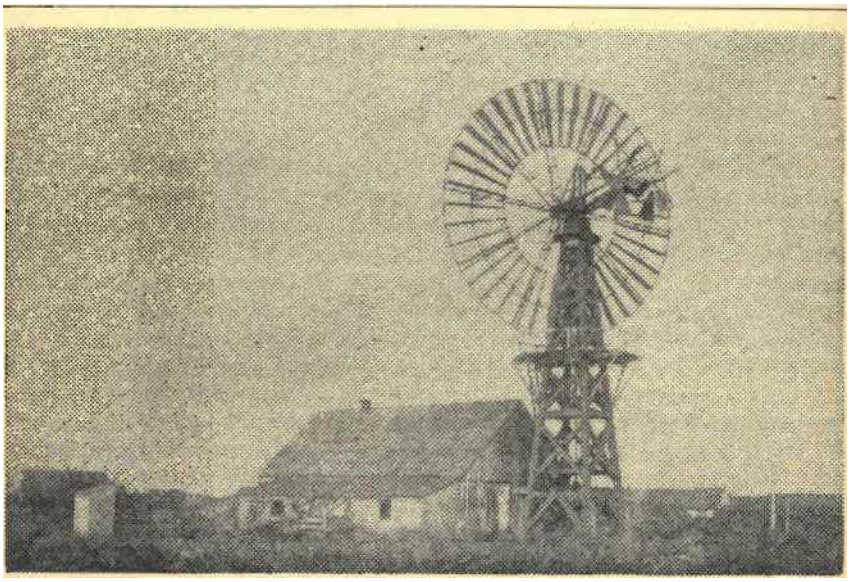
The beginnings of industry in Orenburg were very modest. At first, 2 very small water mills and 4 or 5 windmills were built on the Uran. One water mill was between Dobrovka and Stepanovka, whose owner Jakob Friesen lived in Stepanovka, and the other was built by Heinrich Janzen and was located on the land of Dolinovka. Treadmills, first built in Nikolayevka by Doerksen, then in Deyevka (Abram Neufeld) and in Kamenka (Abrahams), could not meet the needs of the settlement. In 1900 or a little later, a motorised mill (Loewen, Kuban) was built in Deyevka, but it was also short-lived. The housing was too weak.

In 1906, Wieler and Dahl set up a steam mill with rollers and flour sifters in the former treadle mill in Deyevka. But the entrepreneurs lacked working capital. It was not until their father-in-law, the landowner Johann Peters, became a partner that things began to progress more quickly. But the steam mill burnt down in 1910, probably due to arson, and a lot of flour and grain burnt up. As the mill was only insured at a low level, it was not rebuilt. Incidentally, coal heating had proved to be unprofitable because of the high transport costs.

Eckert's mill in Kamyshovoye

Meanwhile (from about 1906) another larger water mill on the Gussicha, not far from Kamyshovoye, had made good progress. It belonged to the Jakob A. Eckert family and was built in 1903. It was a turbine-driven mill. But as the turbine was much too big for the available water, expectations exceeded success. Only when the turbine was replaced by a water wheel did the result improve, but it was still far from satisfactory. The dam, however, could not withstand the spring flood. Then a 35 HP gas generator was installed and business began to pick up.

In 1912 Johann Sawatzky built a windmill in Romanovka, which supported its owner quite well. In 1926, the owner emigrated to Canada.

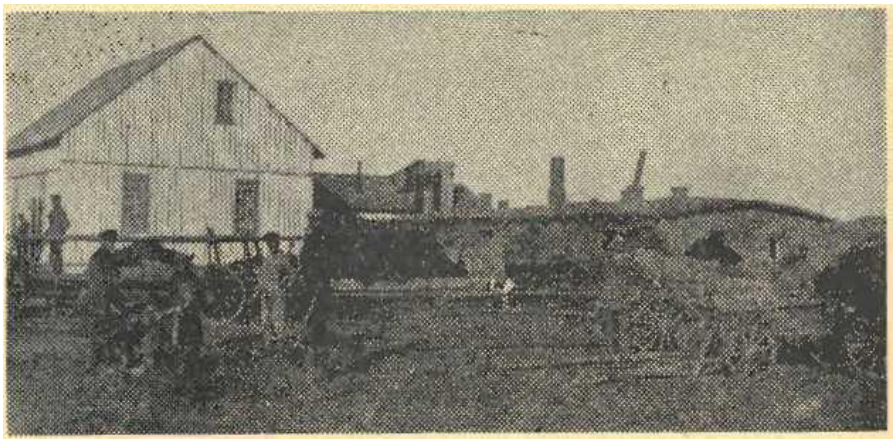


J.J. Sawatzky's mill in Romanovka

One of the oldest water mills in the settlement was the so-called Red Mill which was located about 2 versts south of Dolinovka. It got its name from a tin roof painted red. The first mill at this place was built by H. Janzen and sold to Johann Wiebe from Rosental, Ukraine. He built a new mill with turbine drive a little higher upstream. With the help of the surrounding villages, the dam was thoroughly strengthened. It was a stone mill with a sifter and a grist grinder. It produced relatively good flour, but had a low turnover because of the frequent scarcity of water.

About a decade and a half later (ca 1915) a small motorised mill with rollers and sifter was built in Klubnikovo. The owners (J. J. Koop, Jak. Bergen and Wilhelm Klassen) had enough working capital and were therefore successful.

Finally, the mill of Isaak Is. Friesen, the so-called Friesen mill between Pretoria and Karaguy should be mentioned. As its construction was started with insufficient materials and old machinery, and as there was a lack of spare parts during the first war, it was difficult to get out of the start-up stage. When it was finally completed, it was expropriated by the Soviet government and declared state property.



Is. Is. Friesen mill near Pretoria

On the whole, the Eckert mill on the Gussicha, the mill in Klubnikovo, the Red Mill near Dolinovka and the windmills in Romanovka and Karaguy held their own. But they all met the same fate as the Friesian mill. Most of their owners ended up in exile. In Petrovka, Jakob Wiebe had a windmill, which was later converted to motorised operation. After the revolution it was converted into a water mill.

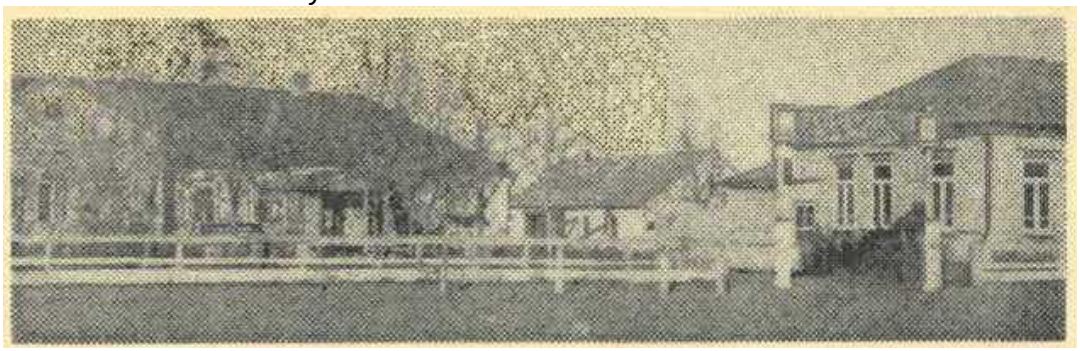
Experiments were also made with oil mills, but only Johann J. Loewen's in Romanovka is worth mentioning. It was founded during the Soviet era and its owner preferred to leave the area in 1929. He eventually reached the Chaco of Paraguay safely where he became one of the most successful farmers.

Apart from a few good (e.g., Gustav Wolff in Feodorovka) and also some less-good blacksmiths in various villages, there was a somewhat larger workshop in Deyevka where even more difficult repairs could be carried out. Joseph J. Friesen, the owner of an agricultural machinery store, had set it up. In Dolinovka, "Factory Peters" from Osterwick, Chortitza, set up a similar workshop, but it could not get off the ground. The owner lacked working capital and also younger employees; Ohm Franz himself was already very old and his sons showed a greater inclination for agriculture.

In almost all villages there were also farmers (e.g., Block, Feodorovka) who worked as carpenters on the side. During the long winter months, they made many a piece of furniture, as well as carts, sleds, harrows and other items. Neudorf's paint shop in Dobrovka enjoyed a good reputation. But it was soon abandoned because its owner had moved to Siberia.

The shoemaking trade did not have good support in Orenburg. Most peasants preferred to buy their shoes ready-made. Therefore, only repair work remained for the few shoemakers. The most successful of these were Fischer in Suvorovka and Peters in Dolinovka. Fischer's leather slippers were well-known and sought after for their good quality.

There were no Mennonite tailors on the settlement. From time to time the sons of Israel appeared here to make suits to measure. Some suits were also made by the housewives themselves in order to save money.



A. Janzen's shop (enlarged) in Pretoria, adjoining house, on the street
the post office. P. P. Dyck bought out

There was a large machine shop in Klubnikovo owned by Jakob Bergen and a dozen or so smaller shops and stores throughout the settlement. These varied greatly in size and turnover, but all supplied their customers - Germans, Russians, Bashkirs and Tatars -as well as possible. Some of the merchant businesses grew relatively well, while others could not get out of difficulties. A serious obstacle for the businessmen was also the great poverty of the settlers and the resulting shortage of cash. Again and again the colonists were forced to ask for credit from the merchants. The collection of the outstanding debt, however, turned out to be quite difficult due to frequent poor harvests.

The "main trading centres" included Deyevka, Dobrovka, Klubnikovo, Pretoria and until 1911 also Chernoye Osero. (For a few years also Karaguy.)

Experiments were also made with bookstores, but they did not survive in the long run.

In general, as I said, business in Orenburg was greatly impacted by the desperate poverty and the resulting shortage of money. With the frequent bad harvests through the years, it increased to the point of being unbearable.

With the outbreak of the First World War and the arrival of the German civilian prisoners in 1915, the acute shortage of cash was also overcome in Orenburg. On the other hand, a chronic shortage of goods developed. The more money came into the settlement, the fewer goods there were. Some people were happy about the money, especially about the hundreds and the five-hundreds [bill size], which were called “Trin” and “Peter” for short. The former denomination bore the image of the Catherine the Great and the larger notes that of Peter the Great.

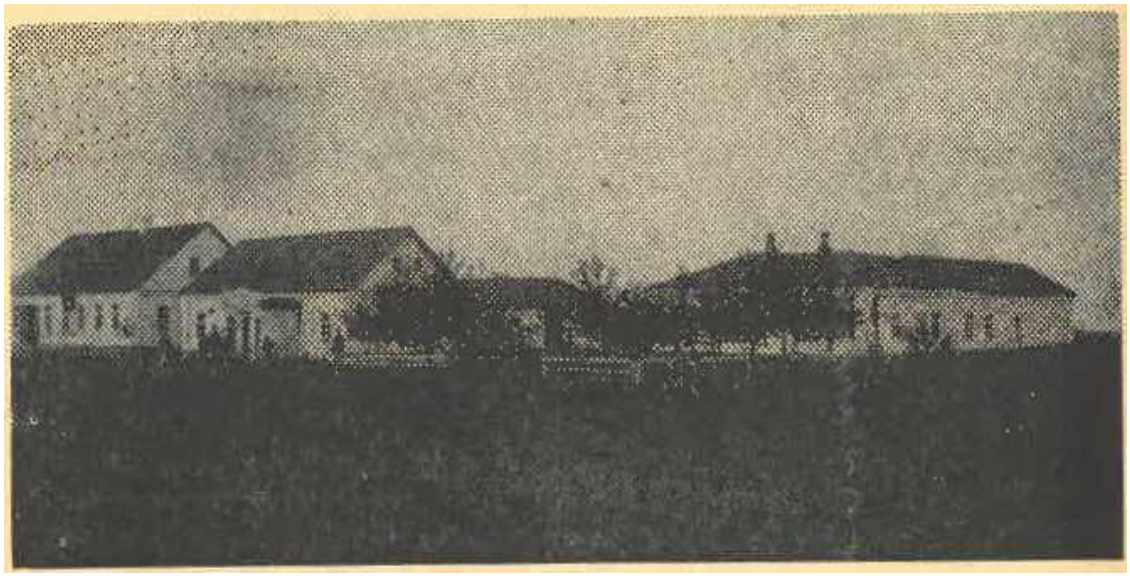
At that time, the settlement still believed in the imperial regime and in the stability of the Russian financial system. - One day Rev. Peter P. Dyck received a large number of three-ruble notes, all with the same serial number. This could not be right. He takes them with him to the city of Orenburg and presents them at the bank. But there they are declared genuine. He was advised to keep quiet about it. After that he had no more confidence in Russia's paper money. It was almost completely devalued by the overthrow in 1917.

After the liquidation of private trade by the Reds, cooperatives were introduced. The attitude of the people towards this institution varied. But people resigned themselves to the unacceptable because they feared something much worse. Things went downhill in every direction, and nowhere was there a way out. Particularly troublesome and obstructive was the frequent interference of authorities in the conducting of business. Consumer shops were not allowed to make profits, but under balances were punished. Incidentally, the government bodies repeatedly sniffed around the money situations of the well-off. In addition, the cooperative stores were now ordered to stock spirits, playing cards and the like. The wishes of the population in this respect were not taken into consideration.

Mnogolavka was the name of the institution created by the Bashkir Republic around 1919. These were supposed to replace the private shops and, of course, far outshine them by their performance. This name is one of the many often nonsensical monster word created in Russia in those years. The word Mnogolavka was quite ambiguous and often used ironically. Mnogo means a lot in Russian and lawka means a small shop, or a bench without a backrest or a wall board in a horizontal position for storing goods. Mnogo-lavka = many shelves, which was true, but in most cases the shelves were empty.

The business operations of the "Mnogolavki" now consisted in "legally" expropriating the various "surpluses" from the peasants, such as chickens, meat, grain, flour and much more. This was frighteningly done carefully. This requisitioned food was then distributed to the officials of the cantons, which included the German teachers. The Uran volost, however, received only a fraction of the expropriated foodstuffs. Most of it remained with the Bashkir civil servants, who only knew such pleasures from hearsay.

The supply of textiles, which were also requisitioned from somewhere, was completely inaccessible. Only very rarely were a few metres of the cheapest fabric issued in the Uran volost. There was also a shortage of all other goods such as needles, scissors, wool etc. The former country goods were now selling like hot cakes. It is understandable that under these circumstances the population turned to black market trading, speculation as it was called in Russia. The Mnogolavka soon lost all credit with the population.



In Deyevka: Left: Dwelling and shop (D. Froese. Right: P. P. Dycks & Co. shop and flat, later pharmacy (Jk. Jk. Penner).

The period of the "New Economic Policy" provided a respite. The cooperatives were now given a little more freedom of movement, and private trade was also permitted to a limited extent.

VII The abyss opens

22 *First World War*

In August (new style) 1914, the First World War began. The people of Orenburg, in their seclusion, only learned about it a few days later. No one could even have guessed that this was the beginning of a development whose end is still difficult to foresee today. In any case, the time of advancement and construction in the settlement had come to an end. This would last for many decades, perhaps for centuries.

Many Mennonite fathers, brothers and sons had to obey the draft order. Some of them joined the agricultural associations (Semskiy Soyuz), the Red Cross or the urban associations. No one was called up to the fighting forces against his will. Some of the Mennonite men were also sent to work in the forests as labourers or guards. At the front, Mennonites could be found almost everywhere in the large military hospitals, the ambulances and the first aid stations.

At home, many properties were orphaned. The women now had to "stand their man". The vast majority of them held their own bravely throughout the years and proved themselves in the best possible way. Yes, some of them had even managed better than their husbands had been able to. The economic situation also contributed to this. Prices soon rose sharply and all agricultural products found willing buyers.

The older men who stayed behind were now given the opportunity to practise practical Christianity. And they did. The soldiers' wives were not only not refused help, but were offered it repeatedly. Where necessary, the whole village joined together to bring in the harvest of an orphaned farm. In long processions they went out to neighbouring Russian villages - Nikolskoye, Novo Spasskoye, Abramovskaya and others - to help the wives of Russian soldiers.

Russians, especially the authorities, soon began to act on the effects of German-baiting by the press. They looked askance at the Germans. Many Russians thought that the Orenburg colonists were the same Germans against whom their men were fighting. But the attitude and behaviour of the Bashkirs did not change. On the contrary, their friendliness to the Germans was now emphasised even more strongly on some occasions.

For the authorities in Orenburg, the settlement was now the target of numerous visits and investigations. Who knows, they wondered, whether these resourceful Germans were not somehow aiding the German advance. Again and again, they thought they had found incriminating evidence against the settlers. For example, they once thought they had discovered fuel supplies for the German air force.

A Mennonite merchant had packed a number of barrels full of butter and stored them in an outside cellar, ready for shipment. Russian chauvinism triumphed, and the Mennonites laughed.

The wing of an "aeroplane", one that had been taken apart, was discovered at a farmer’s property. "Now we have them, these cunning Njemze!" thought the Russians. The district chief (Ujesdnej Natschaljnik) of Orenburg himself conducted the investigation. And when the German owner attached this suspicious "wing" to his binder, and when even a child had to recognise that this belonged to the binder, the Russians made long faces [felt ridiculous]. Gradually they became convinced of the harmlessness of their German citizens and of the ridiculousness of Russian fear of ghosts. Now the settlement had peace from the Russians until the end of the war.

23 *German Guests*

In the autumn of 1915, the Orenburg settlement became an internee camp. About 6000 Reichsdeutsche [imperial or ethnic Germans born in Germany] civilian internees, many of whom had not done well in the Russian villages were accommodated here. That these Reichsdeutsche had first been interned in Russian and Bashkir villages soon proved to be an advantage. The Russians were convinced that these Germans were also people of flesh and blood, and that they did not feed on human flesh. The Russians also experienced that these Germans paid well and were people with good manners.

The United States had become the representative of German interests in Russia first years of the war. After a short time, they demanded better accommodation for the German civilian internees. The Russian authorities were obviously not unwilling to use this opportunity to remove the prisoners from Russian villages. Relations with the female part of the population in particular had sometimes been quite intimate. The Russian authorities claimed that there was an abundance of living space in the German settlement. And judging by the Russian housing conditions, that might well have been true. The rent was very low. For a large living room, the "grosse" Stube, for example, the rent was usually 5 rubles.

The Reichsdeutsche arrived in large crowds: Low German-speaking farmers and craftsmen from South Russia, artisans with various trades, factory owners and merchants, artists and teachers, doctors and pharmacists, captains, helmsmen and sailors. Yes, even an Adventist missionary and a rabbi were among them, and last but not least very high officials in Russian state service - chamberlains and state councillors. These had failed to join Russian state unions. Some of them did not speak a word of German.

It was foreseeable that this billeting would not remain without influence on the settlement. After all, these were not Russians or Chinese against whom one could isolate oneself, but people of German blood, to which the Mennonites also belonged. It is true that only a few of the prisoners spoke the colonists' Low German, but they all had a fair command of High German.

The social life of the Reichsdeutsche was ruled by a conventional politeness. The settlers, however, who were not familiar with the ways of the outside world, often mistook these good manners for cordiality and friendship. This misconception was not without danger for the settlers, especially for the females.

Now the settlement had the [global] market in the village, so to speak. Cash became more liquid and economic progress began to take greater steps. But spiritual values and spiritual growth was not generally conveyed by these involuntary guests. Often, they displayed gracious behaviour but it was nothing more than show. The more serious-minded among the civilian prisoners resisted this behaviour. They organised courses in various scientific subjects: history, languages, geography et al. But the attendance was only weak. A slow decline in the intellectual level soon became unmistakable.

Difficulties were also caused by the fact that the vast majority of the prisoners were middle-aged men. Only a few women were among them. Colony men of the same age, on the other hand, were missing. They were in the field. Close living quarters, the inexperience of the settlers, the idleness of the internees, their very carefree life with mostly excellent food had to lead to tensions, which often had unpleasant effects. This soon put the colonists on the defensive against their guests. The gap between them grew wider. Of course, there were also very respectable and valuable people among these Germans who tried to mediate. They clearly saw the negative consequences of enforced inactivity. One day a former helmsman, Mr. Niedenthal, said to his

landlord in Pretoria: "Mr. Dyck, we are degenerating, we are really degenerating! The language we use now - in the old days we didn't even use it in the barn."

As already stated, smaller and larger conflicts arose again and again from the existing tensions. An example is the so-called butter strike in Pretoria. During the war food prices also rose in Russia. This was a war-related phenomenon independent of the will of the colonists. It is understandable and was not unreasonable that the colonists adopted the prices prevailing outside their settlement. The Germans were also particularly interested in the price of butter. Butter still only cost 50 kopecks a pound in the settlement, while in the city of Orenburg it cost 80 kopecks. The colonists' wives explained to their rich German buyers that they were forced to raise their price to 65 kopecks. But the prisoners were unhappy with this. They approached the local Russian police supervisor (Nadsiratelj) looking for support, and he forbade any increase in the price of butter. Reichsdeutsche and perhaps also the colonists were eager to see the outcome of the '"butter war".

But the colonists' wives had an advantage. As the goods belonged to them, they did not need to buy them. They therefore resorted to very modern means - the strike. There was no more butter to be had anywhere. The Germans began offering more than the producers asking for. But these remained firm. "We need the butter for ourselves."

Finally, the police supervisor had to bite the bullet and revoke his ban. Of course, he also had to compensate his employers for this embarrassment. And lo and behold, the cows were giving more milk again, and the farm wives could make butter again. They were even content with 60 kopecks per pound, because they did not want to exploit anyone, but they did not want to be exploited either.

Through such and similar incidents, mutual dislike grew. However, this did not prevent lasting friendships from developing here and there between Germans from the Reich and Germans from Russia. Settlers did not have to deal with the typical representative of Germany or the German people. A large part of these people belonged to the "travelling people". Many of them had never seen Germany, did not speak a single word of German and had held high positions in Russia.

The aversion, especially of the exclusion of the young female colonists, was incomprehensible to them and was laughed at as backwardness. When Russia was shaken by revolutionary fever in 1917, the Germans began to feel uneasy. Especially those billeted in the building of the central school in Pretoria became suspicious. The colonists, however, believed they could be masters in their own house and turned to the government in Orenburg for protection and help. The government sent a detachment of soldiers to restore calm. Some of the internees were now housed in non-Mennonite villages in the area, and this relocation went smoothly and without violence. The prudent among the Reichsdeutsche regretted this measure, but considered it justified.

Soon after the end of the state of war between Russia and Germany, internees had the opportunity to return to their homeland. They were only too happy to make use of this opportunity. They began to migrate in large and small groups, initially either to Orenburg or Platovka, in order to continue their journey westwards from there. This was also favourable for the settlement since their own soldiers began to return from the war.

A colonist's daughter from Pretoria, Anna Bergen, followed her Reichsdeutsche husband to the German homeland. Another young Mennonite widow from Deyevka, Mrs. Anna Froese née Lepp, married to a former actor, forced her way to Berlin against her husband's will.

24 *Mennonite Soviet Republic?*

The so-called October Revolution advanced from Samara along the railway line towards Orenburg. The remoteness of the railway and the markets, which the settlers had previously found so depressing, now turned out to be a great advantage. Because of its distance from the traffic arteries of the great country, the settlement of Orenburg was protected from much hardship. Horses and wagons were requisitioned by random commandos passing through, but for the time being the settlement was spared the murder and plunder of the Red soldiers. Russian and Bashkir neighbours were well-disposed towards the Germans, not least because prosperity was low both here and there.

In those years, one "independent" republic after another arose in the giant Russian empire. Two new state structures also created near settlement: the Bashkir Republic (Bashrespublika) and the Kirghiz Republic (Kirrespublika). The border between these two republics was supposed to cross the territory of the settlement. However, neither the settlers nor the newly formed republics were happy about this. Each of them now tried to get the fat morsel, the "rich" German settlement, for itself alone.

The interests of the settlement were already being looked after by the Uran Volost at that time. When the dispute over the settlement between the two republics apparently could not come to a conclusion, the Bashkirs one day created a fait accompli: they "occupied" the area of the settlement. Now the German settlers had become citizens of the Bashkir Republic overnight. The Bashkir Republic justified its actions to the settlers by claiming that the Uranian region belonged to its "cultural empire". This fact had escaped the settlers until then, but they had not been asked in this dispute. In order to calm the Germans' agitated tempers, they whispered in the ears of their confidants: "You shall have it good with us and enjoy all the freedoms that are justifiable in any way." When asked about religious education, which was already forbidden in Russia at that time, the Bashkirs explained that they were prepared not to look too closely at this matter as well. However, this subject was not allowed to appear on the school syllabus. Thus, these compulsory Bashkirs capitalised on the involuntary "Anschluss"

One of the former teachers in Orenburg recounts the following episode: "One day in the afternoon there was a knock as I was going through the story of the Archfather Jacob with my pupils. When I said "Come in", a young Bashkir dressed in European clothes entered and introduced himself as a school inspector. After greeting him and a short conversation, I ask him if he has any wishes. "Continue", he says briefly. I say: "We have a lesson in German right now." The inspector: "Good, good." Well then, onward! But the inspector probably didn't know a word of German, because he soon absented himself. As a farewell, he asked what subject I was teaching. "History of the Jews", was my truthful answer. He nodded once more in silence and left us.

A year later I resigned from the school. My conscience had reached the limit of its adaptability. To meet the government's demands any further would mean violating myself or giving up. Economically, too, the teaching profession could no longer feed its own. Most of the teachers were compensated with wheat; but this was subject to confiscation just like the wheat of the farmers.

The fact that we got off so relatively easy in those first turbulent years was not least due to the fact that the Uran volost was declared its own separate rayon. Communists from among the settlers did not exist at that time. The neighbouring population was not hostile to the Germans either. When, soon after the outbreak of the October Revolution, the plundering of the large neighbouring estates (Subbotin, Shikhobalov, Bashkov, etc.) began, the Germans were also

called upon to join in. "There is a lot to be got there," said the plunderers, "enough for you too." At that time, many Orenburgers feared for the small, poorest village of Sabangul whether it would be able to resist this temptation. But Sabangul, too, stayed away from this "division".

When the dust settled, non-German customers began to arrive at the German grocery shop again. The first customer, according to a former employee of the shop, was a Bashkir, an old acquaintance. He could not look at me. I shook my head and said: "Aj, aj, aj, ne choroscho! (not nice). Guiltily, the Bashkir replied, "Everyone took." I said: "But the Chochol (Little Russian - Ukrainian) didn't take anything, did he?" The Bashkir burst out laughing: "What? He didn't take anything? He was the first to plunder. Only the Miems (abbreviated Njemze – the German) took nothing." How happy this confirmation made me!"

25 *Between White and Red*

Times became more and more unsettled, conditions more and more uncertain. Gangs began to appear in the settlement, as I said, at first still disguised as government representatives. They imposed "tributes". The villages on the Gussicha - Kamyshovoye, Chernoye Osero, Karaguy, Pretoria and Suvorovka - suffered particularly from such gangs in the first Red period.

Abram Jakob Loewen, Pretoria, writes about this: "I was a schoolmaster in Pretoria. Until June 1918 it was relatively quiet. Then one day 7 men appeared, armed to the teeth, and demanded a 'contribution' of 7000 roubles from us. All bargaining and haggling was in vain. Finally, we had to borrow the money from our cooperative. The bandits pocketed the money and happily moved on to Suvorovka. Here and in Karaguy they only asked for 3000 roubles each.

It goes without saying that there was no shortage of heated debates in connection with this exchange. Money still had a value then and still had a lot of appeal. During one such debate, Daniel Eitzen, the head schoolmaster, visited us. He lived in Suvorovka. After having the incident described to him, he advised us to let everything rest for a few more days. He would try to make this a matter for the whole settlement. The regional assembly, however, rejected Oberschulze's proposal because only 3 villages had been affected by the attack. Our village now owed the money borrowed from the co-op; to be repaid in autumn. Then our creditors could hold themselves blameless.

One day, 3 officers and 20 soldiers from Orenburg appeared; allowed themselves to be well fed and then told us that they had been commissioned by the district authorities to requisition horses and wagons from the Germans in the Orenburg and Orsk districts. Since they paid for what they requisitioned, Pretoria received 16000 roubles in share certificates. The co-op was entrusted with the realisation of these certificates and then used the opportunity to collect its owed balance.

After a few weeks, another such visit arrived. This time it came from Pokrovskoye. But these bandits helped themselves by choosing one of the best spring wagons and two good horses to go with it. Then they disappeared. Payment was "forgotten". After that we had peace until October.

One Sunday, when we had just returned from church, we were suddenly ordered to have a cart ready at Abram Janzen's farm by 12 noon. Otherwise, we would be treated according to the rules of war. By evening the whole village was full of military. I also received billets. In spite of my already overcrowded house, an officer from a machine-gun company took up quarters with me. On Monday a few sleds were requisitioned without compensation and the detachment moved on.

Soon after, Pretoria became a base with its own command. One third of all the carts in our village had to be kept ready at all times, day and night. Soon after, the other 5 villages were also called upon for this team duty. Finally, we were told to assign a courier from each village to the command, on horseback, who was to deliver the order for the provision of carts to his village when necessary.

These had been the "Whites". In December they began their retreat, which soon took on a flight-like character. They took many a German horse, but also some furs, fur hats and many pairs of felt boots. It was very cold. The whites called themselves the "People's Army". Their discipline was exemplary. There were hardly any attacks by their soldiers. The commandant in Pretoria was called Bachitsch.

On New Year's Day, the Reds were there. They were followed by a gang that loitered in the shadow of the troops. They demanded a tribute (most Russians certainly didn't know what

this word meant) of 300 rubles from us. We paid it to them in Dutov (Cossack) money. They were very disappointed about that. The Red soldiers, on the other hand, were not guilty of any violence.

At the beginning of 1919, the villages further north were also caught up in the red wave. An army of Reds was moving in from the northwest. They were the Petrograders. It was grimly cold. The entire week it froze at no less than 30 degrees R. Even throughout January the thermometer not rise above 20 degrees Reaumur below zero. With lightning speed unhappy news flew through the settlement: "The Reds are in Chortitza. They've been shooting so that the bullets rattled on the roofs." But even in this army, iron discipline prevailed. No one from the civilian population was allowed to be touched, nothing was allowed to be taken by the soldiers. They bought the colonists' best horses "voluntarily", at fixed prices. In return, they gave the settlers their worn-out mules. Carriages also had to be provided for transport onward. The Reds also "borrowed" many furs. In time, the carters returned, many even with their carts. Some furs, however, remained gone forever.

But it was not without misfortune. A soldier had left a hand grenade behind in his quarters in Chortitza. Children found the shiny object, pulled the cord and threw the grenades away as soon as they heard the hissing sound, but then the explosion followed and one of the children died instantly and the adult daughter's hand was torn off. This happened at Paethkaus.

During the march through of the "International" army, which also included many former Reichsdeutsche prisoners of war and civilian prisoners, the following happened. A "Mennonite", whose father used to live in Radnitchnoye, Peters, commanded a unit in this army. One day one of the Red soldiers sees a pocket watch hanging on the door frame of a Mennonite home. He writes a requisition note, signs it with the name of his commander and takes the watch. In similar manner he had requisitioned some musical instruments. The owner of the watch complains to the soldier's superior, who is then shot.

The Mennonites' strict neutrality between White and Red was soon to bear good fruit. As a result, they were treated by both the Whites and the Reds a little more gently. Most of the units passing through had field kitchens with them. With the monotony of the soldiers' food, variety was of course very welcome to them. The sheep and poultry they liked to eat, however, they did not take from Kitchkas, where they were billeted, but fetched from the neighbouring Bashkir village of Gabdrafikovo. Reds justified their "requisitions" by saying that this was punishment for the fact that the Bashkirs had supported the Whites.

The economic measures of the Reds had an almost catastrophic effect. Here, chance had turned the bear into the beekeeper. Some villages, for example, had to gather straw, which was to be passed on to the needy Bashkirs. But in a short time, the snow spoiled the straw which had been thrown loosely in the pile. A proposal by the colonists to get the Bashkirs to collect the straw directly from the colonists was rejected.

The same was done with the much more valuable wheat. It had to be transported by the colonists to Pokrovskoye. But here the warehouses were soon overfilled, because requisitions were made everywhere arbitrarily. Then "granaries" were erected from filled sacks. Once the "walls" were up, the interior was filled with loose wheat. Of course, the wheat spoiled very quickly. In Orenburg such a "storehouse" is said to have been erected even on the frozen Ural River. Since they failed to remove the wheat before the snow began to melt, it was naturally lost.

In this way, the new rulers quickly cleared up the less than abundant food supplies. Due to the senseless expropriations of grain, the sowing area was already significantly reduced in 1920, which naturally led to result in a smaller harvest. But then came the terrible year of 1921

with a complete crop failure in the entire east, which was to cause an unimaginable catastrophe for a very large part of Russia.

When the fronts had been cleared and White and Red had disappeared, organised gangs began to do their mischief. The Uran region was not spared from them either. A number of Bashkirs organised themselves under the red banner, visited the German villages during the day, were fed with the best that still available and spied out opportunities for night raids. Individual villages were not safe from them even during the day, and their "requisitions" emptied not only the flour sacks and hatcheries but also the clothing and linen.

Then the idea of self-protection arose in some villages. It must be possible for the healthy young people of the settlement to deal with the few bandits without bloodshed. The idea, incidentally, was concocted by the Russian teachers who worked at the Zentralschule in Pretoria and Klubnikovo. Some of the young people were also immediately in favour of the plan, but most of the parents were very strongly opposed to it. But a solution had to be found. Some hoped for greater security by leaving the Bashkir Republic. This idea had a lot going for it.

That's when the Russian teacher Olimpiada Viktorovna Dynse at the Zentralschule in Klubnikovo suggested that a Mennonite delegation be sent to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (abbreviated WZIK in Russian) in Moscow to work for the dissolution of the Uran region from the Bashkir Republic. This delegation should also try to achieve the annexation to the Russian part of the Kyrgyz Republic. The teacher also offered her personal services. Because of the spying Bashkirs everywhere on the settlement, this plan was kept strictly secret. It was finally decided to send Prof. Dynse to Moscow together with a Mennonite companion whom she could choose herself. She chose the preacher Peter P. Dyck.

The departure was expedited as far as possible. When the two deputies arrived in Orenburg, it turned out that they would not be able to continue their journey for another week. Therefore, Dyck returned to the settlement the very next day and was just in time to experience a thorough plundering of his house, which was carried out under the pretext of an allegedly ordered house search. Preparations were quickly made for their resettlement to Radnitchnoye, where the Dyck family found accommodation with the Schmidt family.

Dyck was back in Orenburg in good time, and the onward journey to Moscow could begin on the scheduled day.

There, they first familiarised the chairman of the Menno Centre, Mr. C.F. Klassen, with their mission and then drafted a joint action plan. Ms. Dynse had a good acquaintance in the WZIK whom she immediately contacted. Through his mediation, she also gained access to the high authority in a very short time. The matter presented to them and immediately put on the agenda of the next meeting. At this meeting, which was also attended by C. F. Klassen and Mrs. Dynse, it was decided that the Uran region should be separated from the Bashkir Republic and incorporated into the Kyrgyz Republic, with the latter's agreement. Should this agreement not be given, the WZIK also declared itself prepared to agree to the constitution of a separate Mennonite republic!

This was without doubt a unique situation in the eventful history of the Mennonites. Never before had a Mennonite settlement been offered the opportunity to found its own republic. But republics were cheap in Russia at that time. But later developments have shown that C.F. Klassen and the Uran volost were right at the time not to accept such an offer, which at first sight seemed tempting.

The Kyrgyz Republic of course immediately declared itself ready to take in the Uran region (which was considered a special treat in the eyes of those newly-emerged pseudo-republics because of its relative prosperity), much to the annoyance of the Bashkir Republic. The latter and

its cantonal authorities (the Bashkir republic was divided into cantons according to the Swiss model) had now forfeited any possibility of influence in the Uran region, and the requisitions from the Germans, which were so convenient and acceptable for the Bashkirs, had now come to an end.

The settlement had still held a lucky hand in this matter. The Bashkir Republic at the moment of the departure had not yet been collected the autumn grain levy, but in the Kyrgyz Republic the fiscal year had already ended, so that the Uran Volost was spared all levies and taxes this year. Bashkirs' attempt to collect the taxes retrospectively was, of course, vigorously resisted. And lo and behold, the Bashkir gangs disappeared along with the representatives of the Bashkir republic, but the theft continued.

26 *Starvation*

As already explained, the settlement suffered a complete crop failure due to drought at almost regular intervals of only five years. The poor harvest of 1916 had been easier to overcome, as the wartime conditions had brought money into the settlement. In 1921, however, the settlement was already destitute, the countless plundering, requisitions and submissions of all kinds had used up the last reserves or had been wasted senselessly. Help from the government or other Mennonite settlements could not be expected in these times of need.

"The winter of 1920/21 had already been poor in precipitation," says P.P. Kornelsen, "and now an unusually dry summer followed. The seed rose only sparsely, so that the fields were not properly green in places. From early to late the sun burned down from the cloudless sky and the ground warmed up in so much that walking barefoot became almost impossible. The pasture burnt out and the fodder became so scarce that the cattle were already starving in the summer. The grain hardly grew more than 6 to 8 inches tall. Many fields could not be mown at all, others barely yielded seeds. Moreover, this grain was of inferior quality and could not be used for flour.

Of course, the shortage soon knocked on the door of the German settlement as well. Here, one measure after another had interfered to bring about such a state of affairs. For no good reason, the settlers had to bring away their requisitioned crops, which then often spoiled somewhere. Due to a lack of seed grains, the sowing area had to be reduced considerably, and now drought and heat did the rest. In the autumn, bread became scarce immediately after the harvest. The cattle were slaughtered and eaten. Those who had saved small bit of supplies hid them in holes lined with straw. But this action was extremely dangerous, because special Red commandos were eagerly searching for such hidden grain. Woe to the settler who was found hiding it. One colonist, Karl Bonelsen, was caught in the act and suffered severely from the consequences.

Thousands of Russians and many Volga Germans were already fleeing from hunger in the autumn of 1921. Everything was heading towards the east, towards Siberia. There, so the legend went, the harvest would be better. On the way the refugees eked out a living by begging. On foot, with small handcarts or with single-harness vehicles, these pitiful people travel the country roads for months. Most of these transports, however, only made it as far as Orenburg. Here most of them perished during the course of the winter. Hundreds of thousands. Some Mennonite families also made the journey and actually reached Turkestan, where they spent the winter with fellow believers.

In the meantime, the misery in the settlement increased day by day. The onset of heavy frosts increased the misery even more. Scarce bread was stretched by all possible means adding mixtures of: mashed straw, millet husks, weed seeds, beets, etc. Not infrequently cattle carcasses and cattle hides were also eaten. In the Russian villages, happy cattle owners were forced to take their animals into their homes to protect them from the hungry neighbours. The great death began. Millions wasted away. Finally, the survivors grew tired of burying them. The bodies were piled up in the already empty warehouses to be buried in mass graves in the spring. Cases of cannibalism among the Russians were attested to. It was said at the time that cannibals could be recognised by their peculiar look. The settlement of Orenburg was spared the worst, but here too 47 people fell victim to malnutrition.

Rumour had it that American Mennonites wanted to help. However, it took a long time to find out more. For some of the settlers, the hardship was not entirely without fault. For bread, that is flour or wheat, the Russians and the Bashkirs would literally exchange anything. The prices for food of all kinds rose to fantastic levels, while everything else lost almost all its value in the

face of this threat to life. And now some colonists took advantage of the opportunity and gave bread when the offer was too tempting, even when their own supplies were scarce. For the hunger for wares was also extraordinarily great, since there had practically been nothing to buy since 1914.

The colonists' houses were besieged by beggars. In the morning, when the farmer got rose, whole families were already waiting in front of his house. "Uncle, please, a piece of bread! Please, just a small potato!" he heard countless times. It was noticeable that even those who were rejected did not get angry or physical. Silently they walked on - to the next door.

A typical experience with a Russian may be recorded here: "One day in autumn 1921, an unknown Russian from Novo Spasskoye came to me. His face was already swollen due to malnutrition. The rumour that the Germans were receiving help from America had also reached the Russians. The following conversation ensued between us:

"You Germans will all go to heaven."

"What? Why?"

"Because you help each other. If someone is going under among us, we still push them down further. That's why we will also starve, because we've sinned...."

"With what?"

"You know, when we plundered the landowners, we wadded up to our knees in grain. You did not join in then. And now God is punishing us because we disregarded his holy bread so. But he will be merciful to you."

There was no sound of envy in this. In deep remorse, this man was ready to accept the consequences of his guilt without complaint. He soon died of hunger."

In the winter of 1921/22, some villages near the settlement died out by 50%, others by as much as 75%. One Bashkir village, Kuvay, was relocated because the 25 who remained alive no longer wanted to stay in such a place of horror. In the Bashkir villages closest to the Mennonite settlements, mortality was lower because many of the colonists donated and sacrificed as long as they had something themselves.

It was clear to those on the settlement that it would be wrong while waiting for help from America to sit back and do nothing. They decided to help themselves. The settlement elected a relief committee. It consisted of the chairman, Peter P. Kornelsen, Klubnikovo, and 5 members. The entire Uran area was divided into 5 districts namely:

1st district: Karaguy, Pretoria, Suvorovka, Lyubimovka and Suzanovo. Their representative was Jakob Isaak - Karaguy.

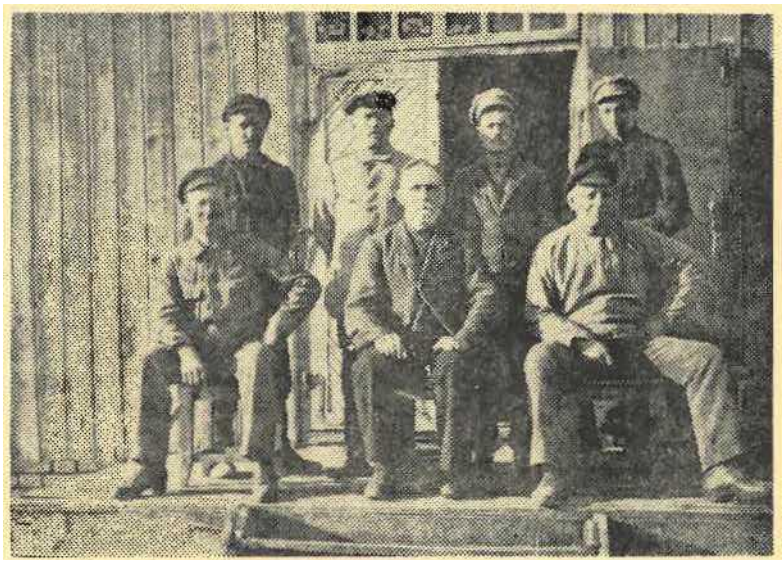
2nd district: Kamyshovoye, Chernoye Osero, Zelyonoye and Pogornoye. These were represented by Jakob Kliewer sr. - Kamyshovoye.

3rd District: Aliessovo, Stepanovka, Dobrovka, Radnitchnoye, Dolinovka, Kitchkas, Kubanka and Klubnikovo. Represented by Jakob Lepp - Dobrovka.

4th district: Kamenka, Deyevka, Romanovka and Fedorovka. Representative Friesen - Deyevka.

5th District: Nikolayevka, Kantserovka, Petrovka, Chortitza and Sabangul. David Pries - Nikolayevka representative.

The chairman of the committee reports on his activities at that time: '"Our relief committee began collecting food in early autumn. Everything that the people could spare was accepted: flour, wheat, potatoes, meat, beats, cabbage and other things. This food was then distributed equally among the actual starving according to the head count. The beats were baked because, as the people said, that way they were the most satisfying. But the best way to satisfy hunger was bread.



The Relief Committee during the famine years.
Front: Abram Fast, J.J. Koop, P.P. Kornelsen.
Back: Fast, Korn. Isaak, Peter Hiebert, Cheesemaster

Despite this organised help, the need in the settlement grew and spread. The donations, however, became smaller and smaller and also rarer, because now even the economically strongest began to worry about their own survival. They were prepared to lend some foodstuffs, but with the expectation that they would be returned on the agreed date.

Then the relief committee, in agreement with the volost administration and with the view of aid expected from America, decided to lend out foodstuffs. Initially, only flour was lent with the promise that the same weight would be returned in due course from the American flour sack. However, the aid from America kept getting delayed. And what if it should not come at all during this winter of horror?

We asked for potatoes and other vegetables. We promised flour, 1 pound of flour for 4 pounds of vegetables. So, we got some foodstuffs again and were able to fight off the hunger for a while. People became extremely thin, especially those who had no more bread. Many could no longer get up and had to stay in bed day and night. One family in Zelyonoye had 5 children between the ages of 4 and 12 lying in a bed. When the blanket was taken away, I felt a shudder. I saw before me living skeletons that showed little life. The skin seemed to have dried onto the bones. But when the nutritious American food from the ARA arrived, these children soon recovered. Some adults, however, succumbed to malnutrition.

Although most of the people contributed to the relief to the best of their abilities, many even beyond them, the misery became greater and greater. The fact that things were incomparably worse among the Russians and the Bashkirs did not, of course, bring any reassurance. It was foreseeable that despite our self-help we would be defeated in the long run. It was also clear to us that we would have to look for other ways to keep our heads above water until the next harvest. American Mennonites had already arrived in Moscow, so the rumour went, and American foodstuffs were also supposed to be in Russia in large quantities. But partly due to the lack of will of the government and authorities, and partly because of the inconvenient transport conditions and bad roads, the American food had not yet reached our volost.

We learned from letters that the harvest on the Mennonite settlements in Siberia was supposed to have been good, but that there was a great lack of clothing there, as everywhere

else in Russia. The settlement in Siberia therefore decided to try to exchange food, especially wheat, for clothing. Since such transactions were not permitted by the government, the enterprise was disguised as a relief action for the Mennonites in Siberia.

A lot of clothes came together from all the villages. On the one hand, hunger forced them to give them away, and on the other hand it was the realisation that not only was it important to get through the winter alive, but also to have seed for planting. The Uran regional office was the executive body for this action. Every piece of clothing was marked inconspicuously to avoid confusion in Siberia and also so that no one would be shortchanged.

Some refused to give their consent to this action. They thought that God could hardly give his blessing to such a manoeuvre, because in reality it was not a relief operation for the Siberians but one for the Orenburgers. The whole thing was not a relief operation, but a business. They therefore suggested a different, straighter path, recommended explaining simply and truthfully: "We bring you clothes to alleviate your need for clothing, but we are hungry". The latter, however, remained in the minority.

Each village packed its clothes in bales and brought them to the regional office. From here everything was transported to Orenburg. Preacher Isaak Krahn, Jakob Wolff and P.P. Dyck were instructed to take the consignment to Siberia work out the exchange there and bring the wheat to Orenburg.

The journey began in a heavy snowstorm. Halfway there, they spent the night in Repino with a well-known Cossack. This farm also had a primitive but functional winter roof. They kept watch over the precious cargo. Next day the delegation reached Orenburg without incident. D. fell ill on the way to Orenburg and was therefore unable to take part in the negotiations with the authorities. These negotiations took a long time because the delegates were distrusted, although the papers were in good order. It was claimed that the colonists were black marketeers and racketeers in disguise. The authorities could not be persuaded to change their minds, and the enterprise failed right at the beginning. The bales of clothes had to be taken back to the settlement.

Unfortunately, this enterprise then cost two more lives. Each village had to collect its belongings from the volost itself. The two carts from Chortitza were a little late in leaving Kitchkas. It was drifting with snow. In Fedorovka they were offered night billeting. But they hurried on, because one might worry at home. Not far from Petrovka they were attacked by bandits and murdered with bayonets. They were the two young family fathers Janzen and Harder. The bales of clothing were stolen.

When the two Chortitza men left Kitchkas, the Bashkir militia had just been present there. Much later, when the colonists were beating up some caught bandits in defence against robbery, a remark of one of the Bashkirs stood out "Just strike, strike without mercy. We had no mercy on the two from Number 1 [village] then either, even though they so begged for it."

A teacher from Orenburg, now Dr. W. Quiring, who arrived in Germany in the autumn of 1921, reported at that time to the Russian-Mennonite Study Commission (Chairman Abram A. Friesen) working here from Ukraine on the conditions in Orenburg as follows:

".... In the autumn of 1920, the Uran volost received an order from its canton, the Tok Churan, to deliver 248,000 puds of wheat, which is almost the entire harvest, as well as a great deal of potatoes, butter, chickens, syrup, etc.

The chickens were brought together, many a farmer had to give up his last hen. A certain weight of chicken meat was required from the sowed desjatines. Bashkirs had ordered not to clean the hens, not even to pluck them, but to keep them in a storehouse until further notice. This is what happened. The farmers shook their heads. Very soon the chickens began to decompose.

Then, by order of the canton, they had to be returned to the deliverers to be cleaned. No wonder that the housewives were now doubly outraged. But an order is an order, and it was carried out. The chickens were then returned to the storehouse, where they remained for another two months. Only then were they handed out to teachers of the settlement and other "officials and employees" of the canton. Of course, the chickens were now inedible and were quickly buried.

Of course, the volost could not meet the extraordinarily high delivery target, and now the usual bargaining and haggling with the government began. Soon a good deal was negotiated. In order to satisfy the canton for the time being, 8000 pud of wheat was collected, as well as a part of the demanded potatoes, of which about 300 pud froze in a canton shed that same autumn. Soon after, another 30,000 pud of wheat were delivered, but then the volost declared that it was not in a position to deliver even one pud more.

Of course, the canton was not satisfied with this explanation and sent a detachment of soldiers to the settlement with the order to search every house and to check the information of the volost. Of course, the soldiers found nothing and left without wheat. This seemed to end the matter.

But how astonished the settlement was when, at the beginning of March 1921, an order arrived to deliver, under any circumstances, all products demanded in the autumn, including the 240,000 pud of wheat. To lend more weight to this order, a troop of so-called ration-soldiers, Prodarmejzy, led by an official named Gnesdilov, delivered it.

Gnesdilov, a former landowner, now a communist, organised a drinking party with his crew on the very evening of his arrival and immediately began to collect the grain the following day without a second thought. But if he had thought he could carry out the order in 3 days, he had not reckoned with the thick skull of a Mennonite farmer. The latter, by the way, did not take the commandment: "Let everyone be subject to the authorities...." so seriously any more. It was difficult for him to understand that these bandits, who cheated him out of his diligence, should also be "authorities".

Mennonites put up passive resistance to Gnesdilov's command everywhere and erected all possible obstacles. Thus, the gathering of the village community always took several hours, the gathering of the carts even longer, so that Gnesdilov could not even deal with a single village in one day. When the grain was finally ready to be brought together, they were soon missing one or the other farmer and the requisitioning could not be completed. But the farmers gained time in this way, their behaviour was geared to this, for the following reason:

The settlement was once again caught between 2 opposing authorities, 2 departments (otdjele), in this case between the so-called sowing committee and the rationing committee. Already at the end of February, the government had issued a decree ordering the "protection" of grain intended for sowing. But what did the rations committee care about sowing! Its only concern was to "save" as much wheat as possible from being sown. Significant was that the canton's top administration, the so-called enforcement committee, was on the side of the rations committee. It supported Gnesdilov's action in every possible way, while the sowing committee was provided with only 10 militia men.

The chairman of the sowing committee of the Uran volost was Jakob A. Wolff, Deyevka, a clever and energetic young man. On the second day after Gnesdilov's arrival, Wolff reached an agreement with Gnesdilov to suspend his action for 3 days. Wolff then went in great haste to the canton to get instructions from the sowing committee. Here they ordered to “save” as much wheat as possible from Gnesdilov. Equipped with the necessary powers, Wolff hurried back to the settlement the same night. And now began a race between Wolff and Gnesdilov, between

the rations committee and the sowing department that kept the settlement in breathless suspense for days.

Wolff reached the first village at night, hurriedly drummed the farmers out of their sleep, "protected" the wheat; that is he wrote out a note to the owner that his wheat was property of the sowing committee and hurried on. In this way he was able to "protect" the wheat in the first 5 villages during the first night, and by the evening of the first day he had already reached the fourteenth village. Only here did Gnesdilov learn what was being played at. But what did fuming with rage help. The wheat was gone, snatched from under his nose. And in the hunt for the remaining wheat, which now began, all the advantages were on Wolff's side.

Wolff worked day and night. Gnesdilov immediately rushed his people to all the villages, but by the time they reached a village, the wheat there was usually "protected". Since every village was waiting for Mr. Wolff with great impatience, the gathering of the community usually lasted only a few minutes, and, in an hour at the most, the "protection" was finished. If he met Gnesdilov's agents in a village, the work was immediately interrupted, the remaining wheat was "protected", and the prodarmejzy were left in the lurch.

In this way Wolff succeeded in "protecting" the largest part of the wheat, about 35,000 pud, while Gnesdilov was only able to capture a few thousand pud. The "protected" wheat was now no longer private property and had to be used exclusively for sowing purposes, but for the settlers even this was a great satisfaction: their wheat remained on the settlement and was to be sown by them in the spring.

As it turned out later, the government itself, i.e., the so-called enforcement committee of the canton, had ordered Gnesdilov's action, since the committee itself had no prospect of squeezing more wheat out of the tortured German peasants by "legal" means. And communist Gnesdilov had already made a name for himself in the field of forced collection. He maltreated the farmers on his own, abused them, or even shot them without judgement or interrogation if they were not compliant enough with his wishes.

Thus, the spring (1921) approached, which this year was particularly long in coming and which had probably never been so eagerly awaited by the settlers. The horses were lean and weak to the point of falling over. A few mountain ridges had hardly emerged from the snow, when the cattle were already being brought there in a roundabout way to the "pasture". Many cattle had starved to death during the winter, and it did happen that hungry pigs gnawed still living cows at night. The cows were already too weak to get up. In most of the stables you could see cows hanging at ropes. The half-starved horses were unable to plough the field, and it took 4 or 5 farmers to join forces to sow the seed.

The weather was excellent for sowing, and it didn't take long before the seeds sprouted promisingly. The farmer breathed a sigh of relief, for now he had hope of having bread again in the autumn. That the Bashkirs would not take away most of his wheat again, he would worry about later.

The aftermath of Gnesdilov's action also fell precisely in the sowing season.

One day a rumour raced through the settlement that the Soviet government had been overthrown. Units of the new government had stopped Mr. Wolff on the way, checked his papers and ordered him to distribute the wheat, previously requisitioned by Gnesdilov for sowing, in 2 hours. This was music to ears of the citizens of the Bashkir Republic. In a record time of only a few hours, the S'chod met, successfully concluded, very much against the rules, the negotiations and ordered the grain to be distributed immediately and sown as quickly as possible. In distributing the wheat, the soldiers of the "new government" were very helpful. Like princes in

disguise, they appeared in the villages, blew open the doors of the granaries and distributed the precious wheat.

All the officials from the canton, including Gnesdilov himself, had suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth, and after the soldiers of the "new government" had also left, the canton was without a "government". Soon, however, the situation was cleared up. Those soldiers had been "Greens", that is, deserters from the Red Army, who were now roaming the countryside and had recognised a good opportunity to play a trick on the government and do a good turn for the peasants.

But a big ending followed here too. As soon as the coast was clear, Gnesdilov returned to the settlement with his command. Immediately he issued an ultimatum to the Volost: the wheat "stolen" by the settlers, namely 8000 to 10000 pud, must be delivered within 24 hours. In case of refusal, he would have all village soviets [men] arrested and shoot every tenth man. The settlers knew too well that this was not an empty threat. They knew that at a neighbouring estate Gnesdilov had had 4 of the "wealthier" farmers shot for something similar. The bodies had been horribly mutilated and had to lie unburied at the exit of the village for a week.

To avoid this fate, the peasants began to sweep up wheat and to collect and deliver the last of the flour from the boxes. The Gnesdilov's people went from house to house in some villages, sniffed out even the smallest corner and literally took the last of the food: butter, lard, syrup, etc. By the way, the Gnesdilov's men were officially called metla - brooms.

The chairman of the Volost, Jakob W. Pries, was arrested along with 7 other officials. Jakob A. Wolff, however, the real opponent of Gnesdilov, slipped through the latter's fingers. He immediately set out for Sterlitamak, the capital of the Bashkir Republic, and worked to obtain the arrest order of Gnesdilov and his command. Immediately after Wolff's return, all the "retaliatory measures" were lifted and Gnesdilov left the settlement with his people.

The dispute over the "illegally" sown wheat has now been settled peacefully with the canton. The Orenburgers had to undertake to "refund" the sown "crown wheat" to the canton in autumn with a 12% surcharge.

In the same year, this method of collecting grain, the so-called rasyorstka, was replaced by a decree of the WZIK. This which promised to make life easier for the peasants, was, however, after only a few weeks "supplemented" by countless paragraphs enabling authorities to requisition much more than been decreed by the compulsory collection.

The weather continued to be favourable and it was hoped, as in every year, that the harvest would be good. Soon, however, the lack of rain made itself felt in the growth of the grain. Although the grain did not suffer at first, it could not grow properly either. The farmers were beginning to get restless; all the more so as great demands had been made on their nerves in recent years. "If we have a bad harvest this year, it's all over for us," was heard in general. They looked in vain for rain in May and June. It sprinkled twice, but the soil hardly became moist. And the grain began to dry out, first the roots and then the tops.

But "misfortune seldom comes alone". The locusts, which had not caused any significant damage to the settlement in the 27 years of its existence, arrived en masse. They were little black guys, with dainty red boots, still known from the Ukraine, where they were commonly called "schwoata Peta" [black Peter]. They came, largely, from the neighbouring fields of the Russians, where they had already eaten everything bare; the fields looked black. Due to a lack of seed, not all fields had been sown this year. Everyone had naturally chosen their best fields. That is why most of them had scattered their fields far and wide.

It was not until the beginning of June that a heavy rain with hail fell, but the settlers said of it that it was "rain without blessing". It seemed to have done more harm than good, because

from that day on the fields went downhill. Since the rain fell in combination with hail, it completely destroyed many vegetable fields in places. This year, however, great hopes had been placed on the vegetable gardens.

And so, the harvest time slowly approached. From all parts of the district, and indeed from the whole Volga region, the news of a complete crop failure began to pile up. Some grain had already been cut for fodder before harvest time, but in some fields even that was not possible. The harvest period was very short, and in a few days, everything was "cleared up". Despondency and dejection were everywhere. The horses tired quickly, and many were at the end of their rope. Never before had so many horses been harnessed and unharnessed on the roads. Even now the horses could only be fed with straw, and at night they were let out to gather their fodder on the parched and scorched fields. If you asked a farmer the yield of his harvest, he would often reply: "Ut on opp" [up and out].

It is completely impossible to get by with this harvest. In order to curb the Bashkirs' appetite for Mennonite wheat, the grain was assessed, still on the stalk, immediately after the harvest, by 3 different commissions. The statistics compiled by these commissions gave the following picture: if all the grain on the settlement was completely distributed, it could, if one pud per head were given monthly, be sufficient for all 6,500 inhabitants until the harvest of 1922, and leave four pud per head still for sowing.

But there can be no question of such a distribution, given the degree of demoralisation from which even the Mennonites have not been spared. A very large part of the harvest went underground as soon as it was harvested, a measure that most of the settlers could not have decided to take a year ago. Now, however, when many had already starved in the summer and had been forced to borrow from the hidden wheat just to avoid starvation, a different moral yardstick used.

Immediately after the harvest, the canton demanded the return of the "borrowed" wheat with a surcharge of 12%. In addition, it shifted the largest part of the levy, which the whole canton had to pay, to the "rich" Uran volost.

As I said, there were already many families in the summer who had no more bread and who lived mainly on the little milk that the cows, walking on the parched pasture, were able to give. Never before had so much sorrel and vegetables been eaten as this summer

In the autumn there were people in the villages, especially in the poorest village of the Sabangul settlement (the Penner family, Mrs. Isbrandt Friesen and many others) were so weak that they could no longer walk. They spent most of the day in bed. There was nothing to do anyway. They drank some prips in the morning, some skimmed milk at noon and prips again in the evening. One often saw people in the villages with all the unmistakable signs of hunger: skinny, pale, lacking energy and with swollen limbs.

As a result of the poor harvest prospects, veritable population migrations began in some areas along the Volga. But when the catastrophe became openly apparent, the population fled in panic. It seemed that whole regions such as Samara, Saratov, Astrakhan and others were resettling. Almost endless transports went to the Caucasus, the Ukraine, Siberia and Tashkent. Ragged, starving, often even without a shirt, these unfortunates headed for an unknown destination. Probably most of the transports heading for Siberia or Turkestan passed through the settlement of Orenburg. The transports were announced by a large cloud of dust that could be seen from afar. They stopped just before a German village. Here they hoped to get something from the rich Germans. They knocked on the doors of their own countrymen in vain. Now all the children and most of the adults got off their little wooden wagons and, armed with buckets, cans and bags, rushed towards the village.

And the Mennonites do not only donate, they sacrificed. Many of them are already starving themselves, others can no longer feed their bodies what they need. But they share their bread with the starving. Up to 200 beggars are counted in 1 village on 1 day, and it is completely impossible to give each of them even a little something. Often it is only a potato that can be spared, or a bit of prips or skimmed milk, more rarely a piece of bread or a spoon of flour.

Those left behind with the wagons try to catch field mice in the meantime. They hunt for these pests. There is no fat to fry them, but even cooked they are still a delicacy. The settlers had often heard that hunger turned people into raging animals. But here they do not see this confirmed. Completely apathetic and without energy they plod along. They are walking corpses. Demurely, they creep up to the door and submissively ask for something to eat. In order to appeal to the Germans' sympathy, they use a variety of tricks. Big, bearded men throw themselves on their knees in front of the German housewives, kiss the ground and squeeze out tears to arouse pity. They are also satisfied with a small, dry crust of bread. Particularly sick children who look miserable are carried around the village by 5 to 6 women one after the other. Parents who have no more success in asking for anything, since only sick people and children can be given anything, often send completely naked 14-year-olds into the villages.

Since the beggars could no longer be resisted, the doors began to be locked and those seeking entry had to knock "German" in order to be let in. Of course, everything that was "lying around" was carried away on occasion. The evening meal taken in front of the house had to be omitted altogether, as this would have led to more begging.

In the evening, the surroundings of the German villages were lit up by the campfires of the refugees, a reminder to the settlers to keep everything well locked up and watch was kept from time to time at night. Some villages set up permanent guards to protect at least the vegetable gardens from the raids of the starving. Those who died during the night were often laid out in front of the doors of the Germans' houses in the belief that they would be buried.

By the way, the settlement had "regular beggars" from early summer on. They begged their way through the whole settlement, and when they had completed one round, they started all over again. These were constant boarders of the settlement, and their number was not small. One of them once said: "Slava Bogu, I won't starve until it's the Germans do."

Food prices were already extraordinarily high the winter of 1920/21. A pud of wheat cost 150,000 rubles, a pud of black flour 180,000 rubles, a pound of butter 8,000 rubles, a pud of white flour 240,000 rubles, a used suit 500,000 rubles, a box of matchsticks 500 rubles, etc."

The reports from page 113 and 118 [there seem to be no reports shown on these original page numbers] seem to contradict each other somewhat. This is easy to explain. The weather conditions were not exactly the same in all parts of the Uranian Volost. This is also true of the seedlings; and the harvest results were accordingly. Example: Pretoria did not get as high a harvest in the good years as the villages further north, but much better in the bad years. This was also the case in some other villages.

27 *Bread from America*

With the failure of the Siberian venture, the courage of the settlers to help themselves began to wane. All possibilities of escaping the fate of hunger seemed to be exhausted. All that remained was voluntary help from neighbours.

It was around Christmas 1921 that the first aid from the American Relief Administration - ARA - finally reached the settlement. This organisation immediately began to set up people's kitchens. All the hungry, especially the children now received a meal every day. Preferential help was also given to nursing mothers. The calories were calculated in such a way that the supported persons could manage on this alone if necessary. But as valuable as this help from the. ARA was, it was not enough to finally banish the spectre of hunger. All efforts by the settlement to extend this help through negotiations with the ARA - directly or through the Menno Centre in Moscow - or to benefit from American Mennonite help proved unsuccessful.

The director of the Menno Centre was, as already mentioned, Cornelius P. Klassen from Pleshanovo. In a letter to the Uran Volost, he explains the reasons for the delay of the aid:

Moscow, 4 February 1922.

To the Uranian Volost.

Dear Brother Priess,

I have received your two letters of 1 and 16 January. Thank you very much for the reports! I am surprised that your Volost has not received any of the two items sent in December and the beginning of January by January 16. Soon after, the February shipment was also sent and yesterday the March shipment (5000 dollars) went out. Your Volost receives all food from the ARA warehouse in Orenburg. The March shipment is expected to last through March and half of April.

When you collect the goods from the ARA warehouse in Orenburg, you must emphasise that it is for the whole Uranian Volost, because if it is only for the Mennonites, then in time there may be difficulties. You must also take into account all the inhabitants of the Volost who are in need, without distinction of denomination or nation. By the way, I assume that you have dealt [with the distribution] in the same manner, since by now you must have received at least 3 consignments.

When I received your letter, Prof. Miller immediately made enquiries, and it turned out that the wagons destined for the ARA in Orenburg could not go forward because of all the snow. I am sorry that it turned out this way. New Samara was luckier in that Sorochinsk is before Orenburg. Well, and our poor government can't pump up its tired spirits enough to cope with the little piles of snow.

The transfer of spring seed to the Volga rayon is also not going well. In January, not even half of the grain destined for the Volga region was brought there. February is supposed to make up for this, and this month has a lot to offer a real labourer who is only occupied with one thing, but it only has 28 days. It is foreseeable that only a few fields will be cultivated, and we also know that no one will be to blame. So, all prospects are more than depressing! Sad! But that's the way it is. But we want to do our duty, make use of all possibilities, and most importantly, put our trust in the Lord. Because of our colonies, we have submitted an extensive project to the Narkomsem (Agricultural Commission).

In short, we demand the following: 1) that our economies should be declared as cultural and model economies; 2) that the government should grant considerable financial support to our colonies; and 3) that our representation should be incorporated into the Narkomsem.

On this basis we will then try to organise a Mennonite association (on a purely economic basis) with legal rights. This association will then have the ability to officially contact our foreign financial circles. The prospects are not so bad, but getting there in the current situation is no small task. We are tired here also. It is almost physically impossible to keep going. On top of that, there are all kinds of annoying inconveniences.

Soon after Christmas our Mennonite files were unexpectedly sealed by an "evil spirit" from the Cheka (GPU, NKVD, MWD). We were asked to sign a promise that we would liquidate our representation of the Mennonite colonies in Eastern Russia and Siberia. The files were to be taken from us and handed over to the Cheka. I was in town just then. Of course, Peter F. Froese did not give them such a written promise, and at his request they left the files here and sealed the whole cabinet.

We are almost always prepared for such visits, because this is not the first time we have lived in turmoil. But we have to confess again and again that the Lord protects us wonderfully, and all the evil intentions that people place in our way, He destroys.

As usual, we had visitors: Hamm from Alt Samara and Hermann Janzen from Turkestan. The latter was writing a detailed report for a brother overseas, so his situation was not an enviable one. But the danger passed, the men left and we were left staring at our seal. That's what you call protecting and supporting national minorities.

We immediately approached the People's Commissar Kamenev with a written request, who was then also immediately reasonable and ordered everything unsealed and returned to us. But for a whole week we lived in turmoil, and our work suffered a thankless interruption. But now they have a new charge against us. They somehow want to make us harmless, because we make it often quite uncomfortable for them.

Our visitor from Turkestan had made a difficult journey and travelled 3500 versts just to seek help here. They are being badly beaten by some "comrades" there. We immediately made the necessary submissions about this, in which we expressed our deep concern about such "comrades" clearly and comprehensibly, without mincing words. The central office of the German section of the KRR(?) takes this very badly and threatens to call us to account for defamation. Narkomnaz (People's Commissariat for National Minorities) will probably also take advantage of this opportunity. Thus, one lives in constant unrest. It is not enough that one is tired to death every day, no, one's nerves have to be constantly flayed by such people. But the Lord has preserved us throughout and our enemies could not harm us any further. We continue to rely on His help and ask you, dear friends, to continue to pray for the work. Pray for success for the great cause in the Narkomsem. And then remember us in your prayers!

What a pity it is that your deputies can't get on with the clothes. Again and again, we have to learn patience. That's exactly how I feel, because my plan was to stay in Moscow for a week or two at the most and then go back to Neu Samara. Alt Samara and Ufa are already waiting impatiently. It's now been 4 weeks and I'm still sitting here. I can't get all the necessary papers, and this is holding me back. How impatient I get sometimes! It’s enough to make me one to hit something. Well, one calms down again, encourages oneself in prayer and hopes that this stay will be of good use somewhere. This week, I think, my matter will also be cleared up.

Peter F. Froese wanted to go to the South with Prof. Miller a fortnight ago, but the departure was protracted. Unforeseen difficulties arose for Miller, and so he had to stay against his will.

Telegram after telegram comes from the Molotschna, all cries for help. The hunger is growing. A fortnight ago a delegation came from there to speed up the relief operation. These

men told us many sad things. The need among our people is already very great in some places. Many are starving there too. In addition, 23 people were shot before Christmas. Among them was Preacher Peter(?) Wilms, the caretaker of the old people's home. Our brothers sigh under the burden and we with them: "Lord, are not all the trials and sufferings finally enough?" How much longer? Our Father in heaven hits us with one storm after another. Does he also find that self-knowledge increases in us? Do we allow ourselves to be purified? If you delve into these questions, you soon reach the end, and I can only then find peace in prayer, otherwise I cannot find my way.

We still have no news of the Neu Samara clothing mission and therefore do not know whether it has arrived and whether it is working there. We received a letter from the representative of the Siberian colonies, Peter Epp. They are waiting very much for someone from us. They are also complaining about one thing and another.

On January 26, the crate of butter that the delegates had sent to A. Peters and others finally arrived. It had been on the road for almost 3 months and the butter had suffered. We did with it as the delegates had ordered Froese to do at that time. Only we took some for the Narkomsem. We sold butter for 8400000 rubles. I take the money with me to Samara, and if there is no opportunity there either, I will send it by post.

Report immediately by telegraph: Miller, Moscow, Mennonite, ARA, how many shipments received and distributed. In general, you must write a detailed report to Miller often, describe the situation truthfully and provide accurate statistical material. He is operating with it in America. It would be very good if Brother Kornelsen did this, as chairman of the relief committee. But since the Relief Committee has no office of its own, the volost apparatus must help out.

Because of the change of address to Pokrovskoye near Platovka, you must contact ARA in Orenburg. We expect that you will continue to receive foodstuffs for your brethren from ARA in Orenburg, while shipments will be sent from here for those most in need.

The Froese family is healthy and well. Send many greetings to all Orenburgers. He wants to go to the South with Prof. Miller and then also intends to visit his parents in Memrik. Their daughter is growing and developing normally and gives them and us great joy. This winter there is much more life here with us in this hole.

I have no news of my loved ones at home. It hurts so much that the parents are having such a hard time and that I can do almost nothing to help. May God grant easier times! How are my siblings, your neighbours? Did they come back from their Christmas trip in one piece? Please give them my warmest greetings. Please, greet all the teaching staff too. I must close, the letter is getting too long and there is still a lot of correspondence to be dealt with.

Please, acquaint the Volosts'chod and the Relief Committee with the contents of this letter.

Brother Priess, could you perhaps buy two pud of millet somewhere there for spring sowing and send it to my parents at your convenience? I will then pay the money to the volost on my next visit. Please!

Greetings to all Orenburgers, to you and your family.

C. F. Klassen.

* * *

This letter reached the volost around the middle of February. What to do now? Write again? But that mean a hardly bearable loss of time. If only the shipments could be redirected to Platovka! But that can only be done from Moscow. So we have to go there. But where would the travel money come from? And then: who should be sent? Collecting the money for

the journey is pointless because it quickly becomes devalued. The only way out is to send butter as foreign currency. For butter is very expensive in Moscow, but no less so on the settlement and an indispensable and very scarce foodstuff. But they try to get the necessary quantity together. And they succeed. The housewives give up the last of it. It is a sacrifice they make.

The settlement now chooses the 2 preachers Peter P. Dyck, formerly of Pretoria, and Kornelius Janzen, Suvorovka, for the journey to Moscow. Equipped with powers of attorney from the settlement and then also from the congregations in both directions, they leave for Moscow on 22 February 1922. Many warm blessings from all the hungry and starving accompany them. The butter is well packed in several travel baskets. The mood of the 2 delegates is by no means very hopeful. They are fully aware of the difficulties and also of the dangers ahead. But they are lucky, they get to Moscow unmolested with their valuable luggage. Here they learn that the AMR (American Mennonite Relief) is making every effort to speed up the transport of the food shipments to Orenburg. At the AMR's request, the two delegates stay in Moscow for the time being to await further developments on the spot.

In the meantime, Janzen is becoming ill. His condition worsens from day to day. He suffers especially from severe headaches. Finally, they are able to set off from Moscow. After overcoming many difficulties which are hard to imagine in normal times, they reach Samara on the Volga. Here they have to stay for a week because the railway between Platovka and Orenburg is snow-covered. In Samara it turns out that Janzen has spotted typhoid fever. He is taken to the station hospital, while P. Dyck, who is ill with kidney disease, stays in the train car in order to secure space and luggage. Both plan to continue their journey on this train to Orenburg.

Russians at the AMRA camp in Klubnikovo

But Janzen is no longer able to travel. When the departure time of the train is announced, the illness has reached its peak. With a heavy heart, P. Dyck decides to leave his travelling companion behind in Samara and - seriously ill himself - to try to get home. Eventually money has become scarce. In addition, he knows that his friend is in the good care of a Russian believer, an evangelical Christian, who served as a nursing practitioner in the hospital. In the meantime, a heavy thaw has set in, but Dyck makes it as far as Orenburg and

soon finds an opportunity to go with someone to the settlement. With a high fever, he is on the road for 2 days until he reaches his home. Then the high water makes any further traffic impossible.

When the snowmelt was over, the Russian evangelical congregation in Samara sent the news that preacher Kornelius Janzen had fallen asleep in the Lord and had been buried by them. He had survived the crisis well, but then succumbed to a weak heart. His goal had been Canada, and now he had given his life far before that goal could be reached in service to his brethren. Dyck recovered quite quickly with home care.

Soon after the roads became passable again, good news arrived: a wagon with food arrived Platovka for the settlement! The AMR administration in Moscow sent one of their employees, Mr. D.R. Hoeppner, to the settlement, who immediately started to organise the relief work. This was not just a ray of sunshine for the starving settlers, no, now the settlement seemed to be in clear, warm sunshine. More food arrived in quick succession, and if no one in Orenburg died of hunger after the arrival of these transports, they are primarily indebted to their sacrificing fellow believers in North America.

The AMR began its work in the Uran area around the first of April 1922. Kitchen meals were discontinued. It was found more expedient to give food to the needy families to use as they wished. The ARA withdrew completely from the area of the settlement. Even the flour and vegetables lent to the relief committee by private individuals were reimbursed with American flour as agreed. However, this arrangement not meet with the approval of the Mennonite headquarters in the USA. Maize gruel, rice, flour, lard, cocoa, sugar, canned milk and unground maize were distributed to the settlers. Initially, some tea and bacon were also distributed.

Dr. Hoeppner arrived at the settlement at the end of March 1922 and remained there until August 1924. However, the relief work continued for some time after that date because not all the food had been used up. In fact, the stock was considerably increased from the ARA warehouses in Orenburg. And this is how it happened: The ARA's correspondence, according to an agreement, was not subject to Soviet government censorship. This also applied to the mail of its employees. Most of the organisation's employees however, were former Russian army personnel. The Soviet authorities wanted to exempt these employees from that agreement with the ARA. One day they sent militia to the railway to inspect the ARA's mail. But the Russian employees of ARA opposed this plan and a fight broke out between them and the militia when the latter tried to take the mailbags by force. After this incident, the ARA stopped supporting the Russians and transferred its remaining stocks of food to the Uran area.

In total, 14 to 16 wagonloads of foodstuffs were brought to the settlement for distribution. There were three different sizes of wagons in Russia, with a capacity of 600, 750 and 1000 pud.

In the course of the AMR's relief operation, about half of the entire population had been assisted. They also arranged for food parcels from donors in North America to be delivered to the settlers and their dependants, as well as packages with clothes. In this way, about 100 food drafts were distributed in the settlement.

But the AMR did not only help the settlement with food, it also tried to improve the health of the population, which was in bad state. Probably due to the general malnutrition, malaria was able to spread in the settlement. This disease had been brought in by famine refugees from Tashkent. The AMR succeeded in winning the services of Dr. Rudolf Klassen from Moscow for the settlement. The AMR provided various medicines, especially quinine and disinfectants.

Clothing distribution could not begin until the autumn of 1923. In 1924, another collection of clothes arrived from North America.

The AMR's tractor assistance was also extremely valuable for the settlement. The tractor service began in June 1923. Five tractors (Fordson) were at work in the area of the settlement, which, according to agreement with the agricultural association of the district (Gubselysoyuz), had to plough a radius of 100 verst from Klubnikovo as the centre. Ploughing was done in 3 shifts day and night. Only Mennonites served as tractor drivers, who were compensated with food, clothing, etc. They were trained by a Mennonite tractor expert from the south, Heinrich(?) Giesbrecht.

From June to October 1923, the tractors ploughed a total of 864 desjatines of badly neglected land. The fuel and oil were provided by the Gubelysoyuz on the condition that they be returned or paid for by the autumn of 1924. Of course, the Uran region benefited most from this arrangement. Ploughing was only for those farmers who only had no one horse. When their work was finished, the tractors became the property of the Uran cooperatives. Incidentally, the work continued in 1924, but mainly outside the Uran area.

In the autumn of 1923, the AMR bought 50 horses in Siberia for the Uran settlement, which were given freely to the needy on condition that the recipients helped to cover the transport costs by providing grain. The AMR also bought rakes, shovels, pitchforks and other tools and distributed them to the needy.

The winter of 1921/22, which was far too long this time, finally began to retreat. Around Easter, the spring had quickly and thoroughly cleared up masses of snow. It had suddenly become warm, too suddenly in fact. At night a heavy rain fell, and when the sun did its part again the next day to accelerate the final arrival of spring, the great danger of avalanches could no longer be mistaken. Slowly, the waterlogged masses of snow began to move and finally roared down to the valley, regardless of path or footbridge, sweeping away everything that could be moved or it buried it beneath. The settlement had never experienced such an avalanche on a gradually descending terrain. The fact that at times of snowmelt accumulated snow sludge finally started to move due to its own weight, e.g., in the steep gorges of the southern slopes, had happened many times before, but this catastrophe occurred almost on level ground. The consequences were bad.

First to be affected was Dolinovka, where an avalanche ripped away a corner of the shoemaker Peters' house. In Kitchkas, the glass veranda of the schoolhouse, about 20 feet long, was crushed. Jakob Bergen's, Klubnikovo, house, stable and barn were transformed into a debris dump in a very short time. In the process, Tina and Jakob Bergen and Grandmother Thiessen became so entangled snow-mud mass that they had to be dug out. The children recovered quickly, but Mother Thiessen could not keep warm. She died after two days and was buried on April 3rd. In the neighbouring house, Warkentin's two-year-old daughter was suffocated by the snow-mud mass entering the house, while their son, recently buried in the cemetery, was swept out by a torrent of mud.

The merchant Johann Froese from Deyevka, a man of 50, was on his way to the settlement these days, accompanied by others, with goods he had bought for Deyevka's Konsum [general store]. In the mountains between Aliessovo and the Gussicha, their sled got stuck in a ravine. All efforts to get going again are in vain. Now they spot a muddy avalanche coming down on them. Froese tries to avoid it by fleeing, but is immediately caught up and buried by it. Nothing, however, happened to those who remained with the cart. Froese's body could only be recovered.

With the help of their fellow believers in America, the settlers had overcome the great hardship of 1921/22 and were now able to cultivate their fields again. The cultivation of vegetables was greatly expanded. A lot of carrots and fodder beet seeds had been left over.

Everything flourished in the coming year and proved once again that God can let the sun shine again after every rain. The settlers breathed a sigh of relief and gratitude. After the catastrophe, the value of everything edible had risen significantly in eyes of those who had been saved. Only very few of the settlers had not experienced hunger. In the time of hunger, field mice had been considered a delicacy and ravens and hawks had been become tasty.

And then, finally, the new crop could be harvested. The use of the AMR became less. Private parcels from relatives, friends, acquaintances and even strangers from North America contributed a lot to this. But the bread from our own fields tasted no less good than the whitest rusks from North America.

The expected wave of beggars was conspicuously absent in the spring of 1922. Vast majority of these unfortunates had been killed by the winter, and the rest succumbed to a mass death in the spring. It was suspected that the ARA maize might have contributed to this. The Russians received it in large quantities for free consumption. And the hungry people had long since lost their sense of what was healthy.

28 *Conflict regarding defense*

In 1921/22 the settlement was thrown into turmoil by a series of atrocities committed by Mennonites in the course of self-protection measures. The enervating years of Bolshevism and the appalling hunger had dissolved morale in many cases, especially among Bashkirs and Russians, and had greatly loosened discipline. Some Bashkirs, especially from the nearby villages thought they would have a good opportunity to get food and supplies at the Mennonite settlement. They raided individual farmers in the villages at night, gathered what they could use and disappeared again. In time, they felt so safe that they even entered the individual villages during the day and plundered without being disturbed.

Mennonites were known by the Bashkirs as a community whose religion forbid them to fight back and defend themselves. The Bashkirs also knew that the Mennonites were instructed not to repay evil with evil. Now, even through war and civil strife, Mennonites at Orenburg had actually adhered to the traditional principle of defencelessness. There was only one known case of a Mennonite from Orenburg who had volunteered to join the fighting forces during the First World War.

But the war had changed many things. Many hundreds of young men had been torn from the care of their communities and families and brought into contact with the "world" - many for the first time in their lives. And this world had generally been very different from the one they were used to. Here the law of the strongest often applied, and if a goal could not be reached by a straight path, it was often attempted by lies and deceit. For years, young Mennonites lived together with people who thought differently, had learned to adapt and to assert themselves even in completely foreign surroundings.

When the attacks on the settlement became more and more brazen with increasing loss, some young men got together to ward off these attacks and make them impossible for the future. Unfortunately, they resorted to means which must be condemned by all who uphold the principle of defencelessness. They not only beat the thieves mercilessly, but sometimes beat them until they died of the consequences of this chastisement. After that, the attacks stopped, but the inherited principle of defencelessness had been severely violated. This desperate self-help is said to have cost no less than 12 lives.

Apart from 10 Bashkirs, 2 Mennonites, Lehn, from Nikolayevka, and Peter Janzen, from Deyevka, (both living in Sabangul at the time) were also killed. These were middle-aged men. They, especially Janzen, belonged to the anti-social elements on the settlement and had been informing the plundering Bashkirs of which colonists would be still be worth a night's visit. In return, they received a portion of the looted food and clothing.

When the 2 could finally be caught and handed over to the Russian police, the "self-protection" unit offered to take them to Pokrovskoye. Of course, they were subjected to severe maltreatment beforehand at the regional office and also on the way. In the Pokrovskoye prison they both starved to death.

The majority of the community members were opposed to this self-protection measure from the outset. Others, however, approved or at least tacitly tolerated it. The administration of the settlement was also conspicuously reserved or neutral in its attitude. As a result, the behaviour and appearance of the members of the vigilante group became more and more challenging. They finally became so aggressive that they threatened all those who did not agree with their plans.

The communities were also conspicuously reticent for a long time. They were against the concept of self-protection in principle, but they did not protest against it at first and did

nothing to restore the principle of defencelessness. That the communities were not informed of these events in detail is not plausible. It is possible, however, that they not wish to come into conflict with the administration. If the communities had shown more backbone right at the beginning and had shown less consideration for various influential persons in the settlement, things certainly would not have taken such a tragic course. In judging the behaviour of the congregations, however, it must be said that the Bolshevik authorities did everything possible to disempower the spiritual leaders. Congregation leaders themselves soon were no longer able to see where the limits of their authority lay. For these reasons, the spiritual leaders were very reserved even then, and later they were disregarded altogether. The great majority of the Mennonite congregations, to which the men of the vigilante group belonged, condemned these incidents from the outset and suffered severely from their intractability.

Some light is shed on the position of the communities in this matter and that of the volost administration by the following writings:

To the Uran Volost.

Regarding the execution of your order of April 23, we had sent out the requested men, assuming that they should report to the volost administration or the militia, who by virtue of their official position had legal authority to act, knowing that they were responsible for unlawful acts. However, since the operation of April 23rd was led by civilians without authority, the citizens of the village of Klubnikovo who had turned up in Kitchkas did not consider it possible to take part in the planned crackdown. To our regret, some of them did come to Gabdrafikovo.

In bringing this to your attention, we declare that we consider such unauthorised undertakings to be unlawful and should not be permitted by the volost administration, because they undermine the authority of the authorities and disturb good neighbourly relations with the citizens of other nationalities.

As for the savage reckoning with the arrested, we protest against the fact that such outrageous incidents in the volost were permitted, all the more so because the punishments were carried out in a barbaric manner and constitute something akin to torture, which is not even customary among savage peoples today, let alone among Christian cultures. They are all the more unacceptable among the Mennonites, who have always proclaimed Christian love as their watchword, even the love of their enemies, and who, until then have tenaciously defended their defencelessness.

In pointing all this out, we disclaim responsibility for all possible consequences; we demand the exclusion from the Mennonite community those who participated in that barbaric lynching. Otherwise, we do not have the moral right to demand exemption from active military service on religious grounds. But we will continue to defend that principle, mindful of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill".

Citizens of the village Klubnikovo: Franz Hiebert, Wilhelm Warkentin, Franz Stobbe, Peter Nickel, D. Hiebert, Peter Kornelsen, David Balzer, D. Hoppe, B. Bergen, K. Isaak, Jakob Wiens, Jakob Loewen, D. Thiessen, D. Klassen, H. Warkentin, H. Bekker, Jakob Neufeld, three illegible signatures. Chairman of the village council, illegible, secretary: Balzer.

* * *

To the Uran Volost,

The murder of our co-workers Harder and Janzen of Chortitza, robbery, theft and the spectre of approaching hunger with all its terrible consequences have awakened measures of self-help on our settlement, expressed in the fact that the criminals were caught and unimaginably punished. All this may be natural, especially on the part of those who suffered

heavy losses for those aforementioned reasons. Therefore, the village community of Kubanka does not condemn those involved in the cruel reckoning, but calls those actions unlawful on the basis of our religious beliefs. In any case, what happened does not correspond to the commandment of our great teacher: "Love your neighbour as yourself!"

We recognise that our volost has the right to involve our village community in the apprehension of criminals- we do not refuse to fulfil our civic duties - but we will not be executioners according to the whims of individuals who may push themselves into the foreground. We demand the legal punishment of the guilty, but we protest against everything that does not correspond to our doctrine.

The chairman of the village council of Kubanka: Abram Barg; members of the village council: Peter Neufeld; secretary of the village council: Heinrich Brucks.

Kubanka, 25 April, 1922.

* * *

To the Chairman of the Uran Volost.

Point 4 of the minutes of the Brotherhood of the Deyevka Mennonite Church of 13 February 1922 reads: "What is our attitude towards those brothers who were mistreated by the guilty brethren, Janzen and Lehn, on the way to Pokrovskoye?"

The Assembly is fully opposed to the way the aforementioned were treated. The assembly is also of the opinion that private persons should not attack people who have been punished by the volost. The spiritual board, together with the representatives of the village communities concerned, are instructed to call the culprits to account and to proceed according to their inner attitude and mindset. Furthermore, the volost assembly is to be asked to prevent such outrages in the future under all circumstances.

Because a number of brothers at the Bruderschaft [congregation meeting] declared themselves willing to submit this resolution to the volost assembly verbally, we have refrained from doing so in writing. But since similar outrages, such as the ones we have been discussing, are being repeated - just think of the last two cases of last Saturday and Sunday - we cannot remain silent. Where is our defencelessness here? How have we had to work and struggle in the last few years to keep our young men free from general military service! But recent events show that we and our foremen have placed ourselves in the abyss for nothing. Taking all this into consideration, we, the spiritual board, have discussed this matter and have come to the following resolution:

In order not to completely embarrass ourselves in front of our neighbouring peoples and in order to be able to prove by deed that we are the ones we say we are, i.e. defenceless, we ask the Uran volost administration to put this question up for discussion at the next volost meeting.

We, as the executive committee of a Mennonite congregation, cannot and must not tolerate such excesses on the part of our brethren, since they directly contradict the teachings of our Saviour according to Matth. 5, 38 and other passages. Therefore, in order to avoid quarrels, strife and discord with our nearest neighbouring peoples and to prevent their revenge we ask our civic leadership to tread more carefully in such matters in the future. Besides, let us also take into consideration the present, when the signs of the times are being so precisely fulfilled. To our shame, however, we have to admit that our Mennonite body is becoming more and more lukewarm. We need repentance and conversion. Let us therefore gather all our strength remembering the word of our Master: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." Matth. 6, 33. Let us try to return to the truth of

salvation, back to our doctrines of faith and one more thing: back also to the Mennonite, who is to be the true salt of the defenceless. God grant this for Jesus' sake! Amen.

On behalf of the spiritual board of the Deyevka Mennonite congregation, signed by Elder Heinrich Rempel.

Romanovka, 29th April 1922

* * *

To the S'chod, the Aid Committees, the village representatives and the Lehrdienst of both communities.

Dear brothers,

All my previous visits to you have given me a certain satisfaction regarding the activities with the Uran Volost. I usually left satisfied, and I was often strengthened and cheered up by you. I returned to my work with more courage. The duties set before me seemed easier then, and I did not notice the exhaustive nature of our varied work so much. I felt a strong attachment to you. When I think back to our repeated meetings on the question of self-defence, when I recall the decisions taken at that time, when I think of the joint work with your leaders on this question, and when I compare that work with today's work, then I don't quite know what to do. Yes, today things are so different! Today I leave you with a heavy heart and completely dissatisfied. I didn't want to leave like this. I wanted to call you together, to hold a meeting as satisfying as mentioned above, to tell you what was on my mind and to hear something decisive from you.

Despite my efforts, such a meeting did not take place and things turned out differently. How so? Where the fault lies is not important. Had a meeting been called, the Volost Assembly would have been firmly in favour. Nevertheless, I hope a meeting will be held, and I know for certain that a good course of events and a fruitful result do not depend on my presence. I would only like to draw attention to a few points.

The first thing ‘d like to point out concerns the lynchings that took place in the Uran Volost. Thieves, ours (Mennonites) and Bashkirs were caught. Then the helpless were not only beaten, they were mercilessly flogged until they succumbed to this abuse. Where will this lead brothers? We, the quiet ones in the land, allow ourselves such actions! We, who only last year repeatedly emphasised: "We are not defensive, we must not be". We, who have our deputies in Moscow who have represented this issue and still advocate it. And we allow such outrages to be committed in our midst by our people? And are these acts not done with the knowledge of the Volost? Has the Volost protested as a local authority should? As a Mennonite authority should do a hundred times over? I would like clarity; and demand from today's assembly that it obtain this clarity from the Volost administration today. You cannot go on like this!

If the thuggish society in Pretoria defies every legal and moral law, if the Volost administration will not or cannot put an end to this mischief, then it is up to you to put this matter in perspective and intervene.

This whole matter of the use of force has two sides: 1. the fundamental one - our position of faith - and 2. a purely practical one - the consequences that can arise from it. Firstly, the major one: if we’d try to pause and reflect and look at the contradiction between our confession of faith and these deeds, we must be shaken to the core. God's long-suffering and patience with us must be great, must bring us to repentance. Or have we become incapable of repenting of our sins?

Secondly, on the practical side, which is less important than the first, but still worthy of attention, would be the consequences of these actions, which can never be undone - how terrible! - that can arise.

They would be:
1. The revenge our neighbouring peoples will seek; and they will demand blood.
2. The strong impression this news will make on our brethren in America. Will the, until today, unprecedented willingness to sacrifice not then be reduced by a considerable amount? I think so, and who will suffer the most?
3. Our work in Moscow, where we already have had one or more successes, will be useless because we will no longer be believed. We could list other unforeseeable consequences, but enough, even the ones mentioned are serious and should humble us.

Unfortunately, I have to tell you that something similar has occurred in another of our settlements. Even if these are only isolated cases, it clearly shows where we and our entire society are heading. We are all to blame. I deeply feel my guilt too. After all, I am a public worker in our society and have not kept my eye on the one thing that is needed.

We should firstly look to ourselves and then to our brothers. In the cases before us, you, Uran Mennonites, have waited too long to make a public protest, and as a person who thinks decidedly defenceless, I dare to do so. When another person also dared to protest, he was harassed late in the evening or at night by the lost and blinded. (God bless the brother for his courageous stand!). This was disgraceful and happened in the school and in the neighbourhood of the Uran Volost leader! The assembly needs to know why the leader of the Volost administration did not prevent this night raid and did not even resist it.

There will be other questions discussed at today's meeting that the villages will want to know about, and I ask you to remain steadfast, do not let any quarrels arise amongst yourselves. Discuss all matters in love, and the success of today's meeting will not be lacking.

How should Brother Peter Franzovich Froese and I continue to work in Moscow? I really don't know. Give us some advice!

From today's meeting I expect: -
1 a firm protest against that which has happened.
2 a similar firm protest regarding the incident at the school.
3 that the Assembly come to a firm decision to settle this matter with the Bashkirs, and soonest.

Please send me the results.

Now a little more about the relief action. When I was with you in December 1921, I received a message from Moscow that the first consignment had also been sent for your Volost. But nothing arrived. You had to wait 5 months. Was it not apparently an invisible pressure, which weighed on the settlement, that thereby the help could not start more forcefully for so long? Let’s place ourselves in the light; it will then reveal the cause and the pressure will be removed from us.

Now, finally, the AMR products are arriving, and I would like to give you some practical advice: don't mix the relief work with the Volost work, because this only harms the relief work, because the Volost work is purely administrative and brings with it many unpleasant things. I have spoken about this with the chairman of the relief committee, Peter Kornelsen, and the chairman of the Volost, Jakob W. Priess. You have the privilege of having Brother Hoeppner with you, who has much experience in this work and will thus save you from many mistakes that we have made elsewhere.

As far as the doctor and his outpatient clinic are concerned, I would like to remind you that I stressed in January in Moscow that, according to your Volost decision, you would take over the responsibilities regarding the doctor and clinic, its heating and lighting. The doctor has been struggling with the heating a long time. What kind of situation does this put me in vis-à-vis

Brother Alvin J. Miller? Do you, Orenburg brethren, not value what you have over our other settlements in terms of medical aid?

I would also like to talk about the schools. I won't mention the primary schools because unfortunately we have not reached the point where they are maintained together. But the Zentralschule in Pretoria - you are neglecting your teachers there. I am not talking about their material situation, but about the moral support you are depriving them of.

If I were there with you in person, I would still have a lot to say, but it's not so easily done in writing. I do not want to accuse anyone unjustly, and my prayers accompany these lines to you, and I certainly believe that you will understand me.

The church in question will deal with the people concerned according to its rules, but this is not enough! We all have to pick ourselves up and let ourselves be purified. Then and only then will we be able to call out successfully to our congregations: Back to Mennonite beliefs! Back to the truth, which alone can set us free!

With love and brotherly greetings

C. F. Klassen.

Krassikovo, Pleshanovo, 27 May 1922.

* * *

Minutes of the Uran Volost Mennonite Assembly, 7 June 1922.

1. The meeting is opened by the Volost chairman Jakob W. Priess, after which Aeltester Heinrich Rempel introduces the meeting with a song, prayer and a short speech.
2. A presidium is then elected consisting of the following persons: Chairman, David Paethkau, secretaries, Heinrich A. Bock, Jakob A. Wolff and Dietrich D. Bergmann. The motion to first work out the programme of the day was accepted, this work being entrusted to the presidium of the assembly with the leaders of the congregations, the chairman of the Volost and C. F. Klassen, Moscow. The draft by C. F. Klassen and David Paethkau is adopted by the commission and then by the assembly. Only point 9a - relief work - was added.
3. C. F. Klassen reports that purpose of his visit in May was to clarify various questions concerning the relief work. On his way through Kamenka he did not learn of the sad incident in Suvorovka, and only in Klubnikovo was he informed of it. This prompted him to plan a meeting like this one, but it did not take place. As a result, he left after two weeks. From Krassikovo (Pleshanovo) he wrote a letter to this meeting, in which he asked several questions. Several days later a carriage arrived from the settlement of Orenburg with the order to invite him to a meeting here and to fetch him. But only after obtaining more detailed information did he set out on his way here.

   C. F. Klassen emphasised that it was necessary to leave petty questions aside at this meeting and to discuss only the fundamental ones since this meeting was important for the whole Mennonite community. It was in no way intended to embarrass individuals.
4. Aeltester Heinrich Rempel reported that the Mennonites had taken a stand on the events of 13 February, of which the Volost was to be informed by the S'chodmen. After the murder in Suvorovka, a congregational meeting had immediately taken place to condemn the crime. At the same time, it was decided that if the perpetrators recognised their wrongdoing and repented, they would not be held accountable. However, if they did not express guilt, it was decided to expel them from the community.

   The leader of the Mennonite Brethren Church stated that no member of his congregation had taken part in the abuse.

   As the meeting is a general one, it is decided, after reading the letters and protests, to grant voting rights to all persons present.

4. a) During the trial regarding the incident with Lehn and Janzen it emerged that according to the Volost decree, they had been sent to Pokrovka together with the arrested Bashkirs after they had been forced to confess, by flogging, by the Volost. On the way they were repeatedly maltreated (as the Volost decision had been interpreted) instead of being taken into custody as they had been in the Volost, and that the telling of their offences should be their punishment. On the way, they were terribly beaten in Pretoria as they themselves said, after they had already been flogged earlier when arrested in Kamyshovoye. In Zelyonoye, however, it was said that they had not yet come to their senses.

Lehn and Janzen sent a request for bail from Pokrovskoye, but this did not happen because no one provided surety. Sabangul, for example, feared that they would have to answer for them with their lives. Although bread was once brought to them from Kitchkas, they died of starvation due to lack of food.

According to these explanations, it is stated that the mistreatment was due to a misunderstanding; the abusers had understood the decision as meaning that the arrested persons were to be handed over to the villages [to be punished]. Others, however, interpreted it as meaning that they were only to be interrogated in the villages.

Concerning the care of the Lehn and Janzen families, Jakob Priess explains that they were fed and supported like everyone else. For this purpose, they were to be sent to more prosperous villages. Dividing up the families so that they can earn their own bread is impossible for the time being, as they are all ill and unable to work. One of the families can live in Nikolayevka where land has been ploughed and planted for them. Later, however, they will have to be accommodated elsewhere, as they currently live in the school building.

As for the second family, Deyevka refused to take them because members of that family steal and because they have already been expelled everywhere, forcing them to move from place to place.

After lengthy debates on this question, Esau - Deyevka proposes that Mrs. Janzen and her youngest child be accommodated in Deyevka, and the others be distributed among various workplaces. This proposal is accepted and will be implemented in due course.

The assembly then adopts the following resolution:

The assembly condemns the way in which the arrested persons have been maltreated; it considers it proper that the other arrested persons have been handed over to the courts. It also decides to ask the representative of the AMR to give special allocations of clothing and food to the Janzen and Lehn families. The executive committee of the Volost is given the task of allocating them accommodation.

The question, raised by the chairman in passing, whether the guilty Mennonites should also be expelled, was answered on all sides that if they were guilty against civil laws, they would have to be treated in the same manner as the others.

b) At the trial for the murder of the Bashkirs it turns out that the first victim [a Bashkir] had offered himself as a shepherd in Lyubimovka. But since he had put some Lyubimovs into a bad situation the previous year, they singled him out and flogged him. He confessed to being the murderer of Janzen from Chortitza and to having committed various other crimes naming the other persons involved.

He was then taken to Suvorovka, where he was again flogged by men from Pretoria and probably also by men from Suvorovka. According to some of the men from Pretoria who were involved in the physical punishment, the Bashkir died while they were having lunch. They say he did not die by their hands directly, because when they went to the table, he was still alive. In their opinion, he may have died from an accidental, unintentional dangerous blow.

The village soviets of Lyubimovka and Suvorovka did not attend the flogging. They were at a Volost meeting at the time, which was also attended by the Volost chairman. He received news of the confession of the slain Bashkir the same evening, whereupon a meeting was held the in Pretoria deciding to arrest the now known murderers and thieves immediately, even before the neighbouring population became aware of what had happened. Therefore, the chairman of the Volost gave orders that neighbouring villages next day send a few sturdy men from each village to Kitchkas in order to drive from there to Gabdrafikovo, to surround it and have the militia, who were also informed, arrest the persons concerned.

However, as the militia was absent, young men decided to act on their own and arrested 3 men. They were taken to the Volost in Kitchkas and beaten. When the Volost chairman appeared, he ordered the beating to stop. After several days of detention, they were sent via Pretoria to Pokrovskoye on the orders of the militia. On the way from Pretoria to Karaguy, they were again maltreated by the escort team who felt their right to beat them had been taken from them earlier. Between Karaguy and Chernoye Osero they were again beaten with clubs in such a barbaric manner that they had to be lifted onto the wagon in Chernoye Osero. One of them died on the way to Zelyonoye.

Since the assembly's reception is rather lukewarm and listens to the discussions about the various atrocities only half-heartedly, C. F. Klassen addresses the assembled with the words from Deuteronomy 32:6: "Is this the way you repay the Lord, you foolish and unwise people?" He asked for the discussions to be stopped, since in this way no satisfactory solution to the questions raised could be achieved and no improvement of the situation could be hoped for. This roused the assembly, especially those involved in the violence and the rest of the meeting became livelier.

The Volost chairman explained that he had not known about the absence of the militia, otherwise he would have led the action against the Bashkir village himself. He regrets that he did not take the whole matter into his own hands, in spite tension, since in that case the events would not have occurred as they did.

Following this declaration, the assembly adopts the following resolution:

The Assembly is of the opinion that the Chairman of the Volost has acted very rashly in this matter by interfering in a neighbouring jurisdiction in which he has no authority. He has put the whole Volost in a very dangerous position. The assembly strongly reprimands the Chairman of the Volost for this.

With regard to participation in this matter, the assembly notes that our congregations have nothing in common with this and do not at all share the attitude which has become apparent in the abuses. These actions strongly condemned by the Assembly.

c) As far as the Linde case is concerned, it turns out that he was only arrested after the doctor declared that his illness was not dangerous. During his imprisonment he did not receive any medical aid. In order to give satisfaction to the Bashkir who had been robbed, he was allowed to beat Linde, after which he gave him about 15 blows.

The assumption that Linde had been poisoned was absurd. The doctor present stated that he had not noticed any signs of poisoning in Linde. On the basis of these explanations, it is concluded that W. Linde died neither from poisoning nor as a result of the mistreatment.

d) Teacher F. F. Klassen reports on the incident at the Zentralschule by reading out an excerpt from the minutes of the meeting of the school council of the 2nd class in Pretoria. He accuses the chairman, Priess, of allowing those excesses to take place, although the teacher had asked him for protection and for assistance. After this accusation was made by various

other parties, Priess explained that he would have been accused either way, whether he had stayed at home or not, and for this reason he had preferred to stay at home.

The assembly joins in the protest of the Pretoria school council and condemns the behaviour of the Volost chairman. Jakob Priess admits his negligence in this matter and asks the assembly for forgiveness.

Following this, at the suggestion of the preacher Heinrich Brucks, the wish was expressed that in future, families should do their utmost to support the efforts of the churches, schools and teachers to awaken ideals in the children which would make such sad occurrences impossible.

6. Since it is evident from all this that the Volost administration has not confronted these incidents with necessary decisiveness, and since the management is mainly in the hands of J. W. Priess, his behaviour is severely reprimanded on all sides. He is also reproached for not having accepted C. F. Klassen's suggestion and convened this meeting in a timely manner. The opportunity to do so was given.

J. W. Pries admits his guilt. As he is very dejected by this general expression of displeasure, Aeltester Rempel asks whether only Priess' mistakes are in question here, and whether his positive services to the settlement should not be remembered. Thereupon, the following resolution was passed, adding item 6a to the agenda:

The Assembly acknowledges the merits of J. W. Pries, although the mistakes which he himself admits to must be corrected. However, the assembly admits that the Volost is partly to blame for many of the mistakes, since Pries was not warned and reprimanded in time.

7. As far as the persons involved in these acts of violence are concerned, the assembled members are of the opinion that as Mennonites they are subject to the spiritual court; if necessary, they should also submit to the secular court. One of the accused then declared on behalf of all the accused, that they recognise they have acted wrongly and that they are ready to submit to any judgement.

8. The corporal punishment used in the Volost until then is considered cruel by many, and it does not achieve its purpose. Therefore, the assembly decides that in future the guilty should be brought to justice by the secular court, first by the Volost court (whereby corporal punishment should be dispensed with altogether) and then by the higher secular courts. But where the church community can exert influence, ecclesiastical punishment should be applied, though more severely than hitherto. In this context, the wish is expressed that both church and civil authorities should also have a constructive effect on the criminal and not just be content with punishing him.

9. Herewith it is reiterated that the congregations protest the procedures used against the criminals and that they do not consider themselves involved in it. The assembly believes that such incidents are absolutely unacceptable and that every effort should be made to come closer to the Mennonite ideal again.

9a. The question about the relief action was postponed to another meeting due to the absence of Mr. Hoeppner.

10. Finally, the Assembly adopts the following resolution drafted by C. F. Klassen:

The Assembly is pleased to note that today's difficult deliberation has led us to our goal. We acknowledged our mistakes to ourselves, we have uncovered a large part of damage, and we confess and deeply regret them.

We hope to God that our intention to come closer to the truth and to remain in the truth will also translate into action. For we firmly believe that only the truth can set us free - and only then will be able to fulfil our tasks as the defenceless in the country.

11. After the congregation had thanked C. F. Klassen for his efforts and faithful work, it was closed with song and prayer by Preacher David H. Loewen.

Chairman: David Paethkau; Secretaries: Jakob A. Wolff, Heinrich A. Bock, Dietrich D. Bergmann.

Kitchkas, 7. 06. 1922

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In the years 1920-22, all those Mennonites who refused to serve with weapons had to do alternative service on the large Shikhobalov estate. David Braun from Dobrovka was employed here by the 2 Mennonite Volosts, the Uran and the Luxemburg, as an economic manager or economist (Oekonom). This labour army (Trudarmiya) had to be maintained by the Mennonites. The economist's task was to bring food from the 2 German Volosts.

VIII. 29 Emigration or Flight?

The urge to go abroad was probably never stronger in Orenburg than at the beginning of collectivisation in 1928/29. Gone were the golden times of the New Economic Policy, which had given both the peasant and the businessman some room for manoeuvre despite some restrictive fetters. In the most brutal way, the peasants were now purposefully ruined in order to make them willing to join the collective. The old world collapsed. Nowhere could a way out be seen. The only salvation seemed to lie in emigration.

In the autumn of 1929, many families from Orenburg set out for Moscow in the hope of perhaps reaching America from there. At that time, no less than 14,000 refugees from all the Mennonite settlements in the country came together in and around Moscow. But only a small part of them were lucky, most of them were sent back to their settlement by force. The following were sent to Germany and from here to Brazil or Paraguay: David Nikkel and David and Gerhard Balzer, Klubnikovo, Peter A. Loewen, Chortitza, Johann and Johann Loewen, Romanovka, Abram and Peter Pauls, Kornelius and Johann Janzen, Suvorovka, Heinrich Poettker, Aliessovo, Rev. Gerh. Neufeld sr., Jakob Neufeld, Heinrich Rempel and others.

Thousands now regretted not having taken the opportunity to go abroad legally in 1926. Only about 300 persons emigrated to Canada at that time. Regarding departure and journey of this group, Rev. Abram Is. Loewen, Abbotsford, B.C., who belonged to that group, reports the following:

Here and there, families got together as early as 1923-25 to "lobby" the authorities in Orenburg about emigration. But they were unsuccessful for a long time. Finally, however, some families did succeed. They sold their belongings, used their own money to pay for the journey, and after only a few months, wrote from their new home. Some of the poorer ones, inspired by the success of those who had already left, sold their farms in 1925 in order to be ready for the journey if the opportunity to emigrate on credit should arise. Some of them, however, were unable to emigrate later, either because of illness in the family or for other reasons. They were rid of their homes however.

In December 1925, a group of emigrants agreed to ask Dr. Neufeld from the Ufa District to come to the settlement. This doctor knew the immigration regulations to Canada very well and was also very well informed about trachoma patients by the Canadian government doctor in Moscow, Dr. Drury. The Canadian-wannabes wanted to find out whether they would be allowed to enter the country or whether it would be better for them to remain on the settlement.

Upon the doctor's arrival, people were generally surprised at the large number who were tired of Russia. The number of trachoma sufferers was greater than had been feared. But they immediately underwent a cure so that they would not be turned away later because of this disease.

The public auctions were very frequent at the beginning of 1926. Those who thought they were ready to travel set off for Moscow. At first, the passport cost 33 rubles per person, but by the time they had it finally in hand, the price had risen to 50 rubles.

However, one paid any amount demanded just to get away. Suddenly, the price of the passports was raised. It now cost 200 roubles. This was to make it more difficult to leave, because this exodus from the worker’s paradise was bad publicity for the Soviets. The surrounding Russians also began to take notice of the unrest among the Germans.

This increase in fees alone - they eventually rose to 245 rubles - made it impossible for some to emigrate. Most of the colonists had large families, but the income from their property was not great. This caused a major shift in the situation, because it was precisely the

impecunious who had wanted to emigrate on credit who now had to step back. Others, however, who had thought they could travel on their own account, now had to be happy if they could get together enough money to pay for the passports and the journey to Zilupe [Latvia].

Then finally they said that 300 people from the settlement of Orenburg could emigrate on credit. But there were far more than 1000 people on the list who wanted to emigrate. There were fears of difficulties regarding the selection of those who could go, but these fears were groundless, because in the end only 285 people were ready to travel. Some of them had to withdraw for the time being, because they wanted to harvest the good crop first.

That group chose as its leader the preacher Peter P. Dyck. Johann P. Penner and Jakob P. Lepp, Dolinovka, and Johann Littke, Orenburg, formerly Zelyonoye, were commissioned to obtain the passports for the whole group, which they did in 5 weeks. Then Rev. Abram I. Loewen and Peter H. Rempel, Dolinovka, went to Moscow with all the documents in order to take care of all the formalities with the shipping company and the authorities. The group's stay in Moscow was to be as short as possible.

On 9 September 1926, the whole group left Platovka in 9 freight cars and arrived safely in Moscow on 15 September. Meanwhile, Loewen and Rempel had been able to make all the preparations. The emigrants only had to change their money at the state bank, and soon after midnight on September 16, they could continue their journey. In 16 hours they were at the border station Sebesch. Here all the luggage and of course the travellers themselves were subjected to a very thorough check. But the treatment by the Soviet border police was not bad.

During the night of 17-18 September, the journey continued. Across the border, in Zilupe, the group was taken care of and guided by a CPR officer. They transferred to the train, into fourth class carriages. They was remarkably clean and could comfortably accommodate all passengers. The journey through Latvia towards Riga continued, now on account of the CPR. The emigrants no longer had to worry about their luggage.

On 18 September evening, the transport arrived in Riga. The rations here were good and plentiful and the treatment by the Latvian officials courteous and obliging. During the medical examination, some families had to be deferred due to illness.

Here the group was accommodated in a private hostel, a rather unclean one by the way. The medical examination was repeated here. The search for lice was particularly strict, and many a woman sacrificed her hair here.

On September 24th, the group was taken to the port and loaded onto the ship "Baltara". The Baltic Sea was quite choppy, so most of the travellers became seasick. In Riga, this group was joined by another from Voronezh District. The entire group now totaled 400 persons. The journey through the famous Kiel Canal was unfortunately made at night. The next day England came into view. Up the Thames, factory after factory lined up. Before the ship docked in London, the papers were checked once more. On 28. 09. the ship was unloaded in London. The luggage was loaded onto 2 lorries and the emigrants themselves were placed in 8 large buses. At about 10 o'clock in the evening the journey continued by train to Southampton. At night, buses took them to the famous Atlantic Park. Here a meal was prepared for the whole group in a large hall. Then everyone was led to dormitories, men and women separated. The rooms were so large that the four hundred people literally disappeared into them.

At Atlantic Park, the group met some Mennonites from various settlements in Russia who had been waiting here for some time, some even for several years, for their onward journey to Canada. Most of them were probably held back because of trachoma. The next morning, we went to the bathrooms while our clothes were examined and disinfected if necessary. And then came the dreaded medical examination. Nobody wanted to be kept here.

The examination of the men went very quickly. Only one man was kept back because of a skin disease. The women and children, on the other hand, were treated differently. They were all locked together in a large room and then taken out 12 at a time for examination. The examination was so slow that most of the women and children had to stay in the hall for about 6 hours. Every single woman and child was carefully combed. The examinations were not completed in one day and had to be continued next day. As the room had no seating and lacked all other essentials, the examination was a very strenuous affair.

A large number of them were found to be ill. Chickenpox had broken out among the children. The mother and the smaller children were always isolated together. In this way, more than 40 people had to stay behind in England. As there were also older children in the family who were not expected to be affected by this illness, the fathers had to continue the journey with them. Later, all those sick arrived in Canada after all.

On 29 September, at the suggestion of those who had long been retained in Atlantic Park, a service was held, led by the preachers Peter P. Dyck and Abram Fr. Froese, Suvorovka.

On 30 September, the journey continued by train to Liverpool. On the way cocoa was served at one station, which was consumed while driving. In Liverpool, the group was accommodated for the night and treated to an evening meal. And then on October 1, they were loaded onto the "Montrose". It was a beautiful ship and offered many comforts. The only obstacle was the lack of knowledge of the English language.

Here, many a contemplative emigrant said goodbye to Europe, to which his previous home had also belonged. From now on he was to belong entirely to the New World. Here and there a loner stood leaning against the railing, quietly bidding farewell to his previous life. Some may have taken stock and made new plans for the future.

The beautiful weather was replaced the next day by thick fog, which forced us to slow down. The fog was probably due to the vicinity of icebergs off Newfoundland. Then a storm started, which did not stop until almost in Canada. Soon most of the passengers lay in their bunks, sick to death, or so the victims thought. But as soon as land appeared again, the sickness began to disappear.

On October 8th in the evening, the "Montrose" docked in the harbour of Quebec, and disembarkation began the next morning. For the last time, papers were checked and the whole group examined thoroughly, and when they emerged from the room, a representative of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, Isaak Is. Zacharias, received them. He accompanied them all the way to Winnipeg. Everyone was now glad to have everything they needed to know explained to them in German.

Six railway wagons were ready for the immigrants. Mr. Zacharias divided them according to their destination. In the meantime, a lot of the best food was brought in for the passengers travelling on credit. In the meantime, several mothers and their children had been detained in Quebec because of chickenpox.

And then the journey inland to their new home began. A picturesque landscape opened up to their astonished eyes. Mountains, forests, valleys, rivers and lakes - but where is the steppe, the land for the farmer?- the farmers asked.

On the way, Mr. Zacharias took every precaution to ensure that everyone reached their destination unharmed. A few hours before Winnipeg, a Mr. Peter (?) Wiebe, who was a member of the Can. Menn. Board of Colonization. Thus Mr. Zacharias' work was continued by the pair. When they arrived in Winnipeg, everything was well arranged. Those who had relatives from the country and wished to go to them were now given tickets in Winnipeg while all others were distributed by the gentlemen mentioned. Some families had to wait here for up to

24 hours, while others could continue their journey straight away. Some were also picked up here by relatives.

The immigrants now scattered to all parts of the heavens. Only years later would some of them come together again, even if only for a short time at the so-called Orenburg gatherings.

The general economic recovery in the years of the New Economic Policy also meant stronger roots for the farmers on the Orenburg settlement. The desire to emigrate became weaker, people became more at home again. Incidentally, emigration was also impossible, as passports were no longer issued. But the farmers were always astonished by the measures taken against particularly successful farmers and businessmen. Energetic action was also taken against emigrants and especially against their representatives. The government bodies were also apparently more tolerant of church life and generally allowed the communities to flourish.

But like a bolt from the blue came the announcement of the first five-year plan. The golden age of the New Economic Policy was over. The behaviour of the government changed literally overnight. All wealthy farmers - including the Mennonite farmers in Orenburg - were branded kulaks and subjected to the most severe reprisals. Insecurity grew from day to day. No one was sure of his life anymore.

Now many wanted to leave Russia again. Rumour had it that there were passports available in Moscow. The suburbs of Moscow began to fill up with German refugees in the autumn of 1929. Most of these were Mennonites. It was estimated that there were 14000 refugees in all. Thanks to the efforts of the German government, about 6700 managed to leave the country.

The forced repatriation of these unfortunates is a dark chapter in the history of the German colonists in Russia. Many of these "Muscovites" were sentenced to heavy prison terms by the GPU. Abram Driediger - Pretoria, for example, received 10 years in a forced labour camp. But he died after only 3 years. His wife was exiled to the Ural Mountains with their children. A female GPU employee assured Mrs. Driediger on arrival: "Well, you, fat one, we'll get you thin." And she succeeded. She had to do hard forced labour. Together with others, she had to saw, peel and carry tree trunks. Her body couldn't take it for long, and soon she began to spit up blood. She was then discharged as a complete wreck. But even after her release she had to be on the road all the time because of the GPU. For a long time she hid in Central Asia, and finally ended up in Chortitza on the Dnieper. Then she went west with the German Wehrmacht and finally landed in the Wartegau. Here she was caught by the advancing Red troops and sent with her own kind to the Kola Peninsula in the far north. Her situation is terrible and, by human standards, completely hopeless.

Daniel Loewen, formerly of Pretoria, writes from Germany about that time: ".... From 1923 to 1929 we had good times in Orenburg, because it was the time of the New Economic Policy. But then a development began that we did not like. In 1929, in autumn, I also went to Moscow with my wife and son but was sent back by force. At the beginning of December, we were back home. Here we were received in the best possible way. Two days before Christmas, I and A. U. had to go to the GPU. But everything went smoothly there. We were allowed to go home again.

Then on 31 December 1929 I received a letter ordering me to deliver 3000 rubles and 1000 pud of wheat in 24 hours.

On 2 January 1930, I, A. J., P. and A. N, H. U. were "dekulakized". Dekulakization consisted of everything being taken away from us. We also had to leave our homes. So we

went to live with acquaintances with the few belongings they had left us. Winter passed in silence.

In the spring we 5 dekulakized received 4 horses, the worst of course that could be found in the village (all the horses were already collective farm property), and 20 hectares of land, also the worst and the furthest away from the village. We had to sow this land with wheat, oats and maize. We did that as best we could. The yield was even better than in the collective farm. For the threshing time we were provided with a threshing machine and two ladder trucks. We finished the field work earlier than our village.

Soon afterwards I was the first to be resettled from Pretoria near Shishkino to kulak land. There I found my brother-in-law P. E. and his brother J. from Alma-Ata - H. K., also several Russian families. We had to build earth huts. It soon began to freeze. We were also deprived right to vote. In the middle of February I took mine (family) and went AWOL....[fled]

But I had no peace in Ukraine either. Again and again, it was dredged up here that I was a "kulak". But then the war came and I ended up in Germany with many others. Here I was mercifully saved from being transported back to Russia. And then I was allowed to go to Paraguay with the first transport. We were even able to take my daughter-in-law and her children while our son was taken prisoner by the Russians.

Only a few years after the emigration of this group, the situation in the Soviet Union deteriorated so radically that most Orenburgers regretted not having emigrated when the red door was still open a crack.

The tragic fate of the settlement is closely interwoven with that of the other German colonists in that country and also with that of the Russian peasantry. It is determined first of all by the Bolshevik economic policy. The aim of the red ruling class in Russia was the exploitation of approximately 170 million Russian people. The means to this end was the economic collective, the kolkhoz, which was made possible both by a tight grouping and control of the labour force and a secure and complete recording of the yield of the labour.

Collectivisation was to be carried out within the framework of the first five-year plan (1928- 1933). In 1928, the period of the New Economic Policy, which had meant a restful respite for the country, also came to an end. In order to prepare the ground for collectivisation, Moscow decided first of all to ruin all private agriculture right down to the ground in 1 or 2 years, to make the peasants ready for the collective. The peasants are economically taxed to death. From the outset they are clear that they will never succeed in making the entire Russian peasant population subservient to their plans, let alone win them over. They know that the most valuable Russian farming class, which includes all the German colonists, will never be able to accept or even come to terms with the Bolshevik economic form.

The Soviet government therefore decides to physically destroy this stratum - approximately 20 million people - to "liquidate" them. Moscow promotes the concept of the "kulak", the people's villain, who must be destroyed in the course of "dekulakization". This "cleansing" of the kulak elements is to go hand in hand with the preparation of the rest of the peasants, the survivors, for the collective economy.

As stated, the entire agricultural sector is to be taxed to death in 1 or 2 years. The "kulaks" who are to be "liquidated" can also be "individually" taxed. This "taxation" consists of imposing ever greater taxes in grain and money on those affected in quick succession, so that they are often completely ruined economically few days. The rest of his hard-earned possessions are then sold for a mockery or confiscated by the state for some collective farm.

Soviet authorities are not at all concerned with capturing only those farmers who are classified as "kulaks" according to their terminology, but rather they want to destroy all those elements, with one stroke, who are obstacles to the Soviet regime or who could one day become a danger to it. Therefore, a certain percentage of the population is designated for dekulakization, generally 3-7%, in some German villages of the Ukraine even 50%!

Where to now with the mass of the "dekulakized"? 1928-1933, it is no longer possible to shoot some 20 million people without causing serious repercussions abroad. However, Moscow is not at a loss for a practical solution for its purposes.

Already in "war-time communism", former prosperous farmers and especially former landowners from Mennonite colonies in the Ukraine, who had moved to the villages soon after the Bolshevik overthrow, were "expelled" to remote areas: to the far north, the Caucasus, Turkestan or Siberia. Later, by the way, these expellees often considered themselves lucky to be safe for the time being, as long as they did not somehow come to the attention of the local GPU.

An unbelievably much harsher measure than that expulsion is the so-called resettlement, which was applied in the course of collectivisation. Families destined for "physical extermination" are led equipped with an axe, a spade and a bucket to a mountain near the

settlement to "settle" there. Any connection with the village is strictly forbidden. Any of the villagers who attempt to ease the cruel fate of the outcasts are forced to share their fate. The outcasts die in a very short time, if they do not manage to escape.

But the most important, harshest measure by which this "physical destruction" of the peasant masses unsuitable for the collectives is achieved, is by banishment to the primeval forests of the north. The request to a "kulak" to prepare for the journey to the north is almost always tantamount to a death sentence. The peasants are sent to the swamps, not to serve a sentence, but to be "liquidated" in a way that is as inconspicuous as possible to the outside world. In the process, the strength of these unfortunates is exploited to the last breath. Every exiled, man or woman, has to fulfil a fixed work standard. Those who are no longer physically able to do so are not given the daily ration of 400 grams of bread, and may even be refused entry to the barracks at night. He must freeze to death outside or slowly starve to death. But all exiles, almost without exception, die, some earlier, others later.

It is understandable that the Mennonites in Orenburg were affected by this enormous upheaval even more severely than the Russian population. As early as the beginning of December 1929, the number of German "kulaks" in the whole of Russia was estimated at 5% of the German colonist population. Altogether, by 1933, of the approximately 1.1 million Germans living in the countryside, 11,000 families with about 65,000 persons are said to fallen "physical extermination".

But not only materially, also subjectively the Mennonite suffers more from the Soviet agricultural policy than the Russian. The loss of economic independence affects him much more severely, and he also feels the dissolution of the family, the dechurching and the destruction more than the native population of the country.

Gradually the leading Mennonites begin to realise that it is not only their economic existence that is to be destroyed, but that they themselves, the people, are the target of this terrible onslaught. They stand in the way of collectivisation because they can never become agricultural industrial workers. For a decade, the people of Orenburg have fought against the threat of ruin with great determination. For a long time, they too, considered Bolshevism a temporary phenomenon and waited year in and year out for an overthrow which, according to them, was bound to come one day.

But then they begin to realise the hopelessness of their unequal struggle, all the more so because the Bolsheviks are not at all inclined to enter into settlement with the Mennonites or even to make an exception for their sake. In Russia's inexhaustible wealth of people, the Mennonites, as collective farmers, play only a very minor role numerically. And all the most valuable qualities of the Mennonite farmer: enterprise, energy, diligence and thrift are not only not positive for collective agriculture but rather an obstacle for the primitive collective. The Soviet Union does not need qualified farmers, but impersonal slave labour.

The mass exile of Germans to the huge forced labour camps on the White Sea began around January 1930, after only individual and small groups had been forced to take this death path in the previous year. According to a speech by the former Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov at the Council of Europe Congress in 1936, 17.5 million kulaks had been "liquidated" by then and among them an estimated 300,000 Germans.

From the settlement of Orenburg were banished:
Preacher David H. Loewen, Deyevka
Preacher Heinrich J. Quiring, Romanovka
Peter P. Vogt, Pretoria

Jakob A. Wolff, Deyevka
Elder Isaac G. Krahn, Dolinovka
Franz Unruh, Kitschkas
Teacher Johann A. Guenther, Dobrovka
Teacher Johann J. Friesen, Romanovka
Johann J. Knelsen, Romanovka
Preacher Johann Rempel, Radnitchnoye
Heinrich J. Lepp, Dobrowka
Eldest David Paethkau, Kamenka
Preacher Jakob Rempel, Kantserowka
Preacher Jakob Rogalsky, Kantserowka
Preacher Gerhard Braun, Kamenka
Isaak Derksen, Kitschkas
Abram Driediger, Pretoria
Peter A. Guenther, Dobrovka
Teacher Isaak P. Penner, Dolinovka

In the unequal struggle for the kolkhoz, the Soviet government would naturally win, all the more so because it knew how to hit its opponents with merciless force. In just under a decade there was not a single free farmer left on the settlement of Orenburg, now Chkalovskaya Oblast. The former big farmer, is soon only an agricultural labourer there, too.

Each village becomes a kolkhoz. Occasionally 2 villages, e.g., Deyevka and Romanovka, Aliessovo, Stepanovka and Dobrovka united into 1 collective. The entire livestock and inventory become the property of the state without compensation. The former farmer is only allowed to consider his house as his property, as well as a cow, a pig and some chickens.

And then the Soviet "wheat factories" begin to work, at first hardly profitable due to sloppiness and lack of experience, but very soon with huge profits. For the agricultural inventory has fallen to the collective farm free of charge, and all the workers work almost for nothing. The state is the sole employer, and it alone sets the remuneration for the work.

Trudodni are introduced as units of account. Trudodni are working days. But the state only pays just enough for a trudodni so that the "kolkhoznik" does not starve. It is only indirectly interested in worker's family, the sick, the old and the invalids. And in order to keep his family even barely afloat, the kolkhoz "farmer" has to work at least 40 days a month.

But the establishment of the collective farm is only the first step towards "socialist" reorganisation. The security of the system will only be guaranteed, it is believed, when a completely different kind of human being has been created. Contemporaries are not supposed to be the bearers of the new state, at best they can only be the transition. The aim is to create the "Soviet" man, the standardised man, the will-less robot. The means by which these goals can be achieved are not quite clear. Every means that leads to success is right and proper.

The government's "breadbasket policy "proves to be particularly effective in re-education. One gives the Soviet citizen only just enough food that he does not starve. As a result, the people's thinking soon only revolves around his daily bread. How will I be satiated? What will my family eat tomorrow? How will we get through the next winter? How do I come into possession of a metre of cloth?

Nothing is else possible other than that the spiritual horizon of the "kolkhoznik" begins to narrow in a few years under these circumstances. Soon he lacks almost any spiritual stimulation. He is also cut off from the outside world, from abroad. Whoever writes abroad, or receives letters or even food parcels from abroad, is first warned and then blacklisted. If, however, it seems expedient to the state to "liquidate" the letter recipient, his foreign correspondence is taken as an opportunity to banish the inconvenient person to Archangelsk.

It is understandable that in such circumstances man becomes narrow-minded, petty and extremely selfish. Day in, day out, he is surrounded by bitterest poverty, the wretchedness of the household and the paltriness of the appearance of his fellow men. On such soil, envy, jealousy, greed and deceit are bound to flourish. But that is precisely what the red rulers are striving for. Degradation of the human being, his depersonalisation are one of the means to "reforge" him, to detach him from his past and to make him suitable for the purposes of the government.

This process of standardisation of the human being, which causes so much suffering in the older generation, is only passively, so to speak indirectly experienced by the younger children. They know no other, no fuller life. They are not familiar with a festive atmosphere on a Sunday morning, when young and old head for church after a normal breakfast in festive clothes, they have never experienced the magic of the burning candle lights on a Christmas

Eve, they do not know the tastes and smells of Christmas baking, the sweet excitement of "plate setting" [an empty plate or dish was set out, to be filled with candy, oranges, nuts, etc.] the impatient excitement of "wishing" [reciting poems before receiving gifts], the autumnal shopping, the fat "butchering", the richness of the snow-white brown roasted Zwieback [buns backed to rusks] and the smell of the bean coffee which permeating the whole home. Their world is the world of eternal shortage, of perpetual hunger, of inadequate clothing, of mistrust, secrecy and mutual spying.

School becomes a playground for the most absurd experiments. For the child is now also "free", released from the "tyranny" of the teacher and the parents. The opposition between parents and children can even go so far that children rebel against their own parents, that children report their parents to the authorities because they prayed in the evening, or because they perhaps once made a derogatory statement about the Soviet regime, its institutions or one of its representatives.

There is no place for religious education in these schools of course. "Religion is opium for the people!" The school day no longer begins with a short devotion. Singing spiritual songs is also forbidden. The Christmas tree is abolished. School has only to impart practical knowledge. Its main task is to educate children to become Bolsheviks.

The congregations are systematically deprived of their leaders. Elders and preachers are banished. But the church services are not yet forbidden, as consideration is still being given to foreign countries' opinions. What is the hurry? Time does not only work for the Bolsheviks; time is also the property of the Bolshevik state. The church is taxed, taxed more and more. And one day the taxes can no longer be paid. Then the state has no choice but to close the church.

Church funerals, engagements, weddings, the Christmas celebrations, Easter and Pentecost all fall away "by themselves" over time. For some time the five-day week is introduced. The worker has every fifth day to himself. But never are the members of a family free at the same time. This confuses the days of the week. No day stands out in the week, not even Sunday. It has been dethroned. It has become a working day.

Since the outbreak of the First World War, there has only been 1 Mennonite newspaper in the country for a short time - "Unser Blatt". But from every Russian newspaper, from every schoolbook, indeed from every printed product that the Soviet citizen picks up, the agile Soviet propaganda jumps out at him. It goes without saying that the radio exclusively serves this propaganda also.

In this way, the Soviet government is coming into the Orenburg settlement, a step closer to its goal with each passing day. The proletarian mass man is also emerging here. In just a few decades, the youth will also have become slaves to the state, it is quite assured. The older people are gradually dying out. Those who do not join in, or who even dare to oppose Bolshevik roller, will be mercilessly destroyed.

A carter of the collective economy.

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Former Orenburgers who now live in Europe or in the two Americas are particularly attached to their former homeland. Why is that? Surely not only because he knows many of his relatives there, that perhaps his parents and other close relatives rest in the cemeteries there, that people close to him had to go into exile from there? No, all this also connects the Trakter, the Ignatievs or the Chortitzaer with their earlier settlements.

What made the Orenburgers grow so close to their highlands, which had such unusually pure air and such healing rays of sunshine, was the hardship, the perpetual hardship it imposed on them - the worry about the harvest, which was endangered every year, the extremely hard work in the short summer months, the quiet and blindingly white winter and, last but not least, the spring, which was so lavishly abundant. The Orenburgers had to struggle for their daily bread and their relative economic security as hard as nowhere else on any Mennonite settlement in Russia. And it was all this that made him take root so firmly, made him grow so close to the piece of homeland south of the Urals.

The interest of the "Orenburg expatriate" in his former homeland has not waned for a moment. What are the conditions in Orenburg today, he keeps asking himself; what have the Bolsheviks done with his former homeland? But Orenburg is lies behind the "iron curtain". All external connections to Orenburg have also been deliberately cut. Only very rarely does a letter from there reach overseas. And most of them are colourless and devoid of content, which is precisely why they are so distressing. Fear speaks from every line of these short letters, the fear of saying one word too many; the fear of being sent into exile because of a single word.

The following letter, which was sent to Canada - without a sender and without a signature - is therefore all the more valuable. A simple Mennonite farmer's wife has captured her unhappy Red everyday life in an almost classic way: the consuming fear, the disintegrating poverty, the dissolution of all moral values and principles and the merciless exploitation by the Bolshevik state. This letter has historical value, and may it be recorded here for future, hopefully, happier generations.

* * *

X, Orenburg settlement, June 1946

Dear children and brothers and sisters,

The Lord breaks in at midnight, now all is still. I wish you the best of health. We have received your letter. Thank you for not forgetting us yet. There is always such excitement and longing. We siblings who are still here discuss everything and ask why we have to live such a shattered life here. I can't even describe how we are. And the complaining and moaning won't interest you either. But I would like to know if you know what life on the collective farm is like? Do you have any idea if I write that we have earned so and so many Trudodni, and that we get so and so much for one Trudodni? You probably can't understand that. It is also so stupidly calculated. My head can't describe it, because our intellect has already suffered.

We all look so old and greying. The hair is grey and the face is wrinkled. I worked terribly (hard) in the collective farm. Summer and winter I had to drive fodder from P. day after day. And then: snow fences ha to be put up. I had to see to it that I stayed alive with my children. My husband was taken from me, and even today there is no trace of him. Now I'm all broken. The food is so weak. Year in, year out, no fat, not a bit of meat, then with time you have no strength left in your bones. And now working doesn't help any more. We don't get any bread, only if you can squeeze through a window or a back door, and that's hard. Stealing is not a sin here, except for the one who is stolen from. There is a lot of stealing here.

Vehicles drive here every day. Right from the new year they drove away our grain. Thousands of puds! This is the grain that our hard work and sweat have brought in and threshed out. We watch as everything is taken away and we ourselves have no bread year in, year out. And that is why so many go into exile or prison. Man wants to live, doesn't he? But who knows if I am not already writing too much? If I knew that this letter and its contents would arrive, then I would describe our situation to you in installments. But one doesn't know. And one's mind is already so shattered. My right hand is always shaking. If someone had told me in the past that when you are 50 years old, you and your children will not have a shirt on your back, I would have said: "You must be stupid." And now it's really come to that. We haven't had a shirt for two years now, and it's so cold to sleep without a shirt in the winter. One shirt, provides all the health. The boys have to stay behind the stove because of the clothes. A. was up to a whole month on top of the stove. And the beds are so very bad. You can't imagine how my boys lie in bed. They only have rags to lie on, and they are covered with pieces of a wadding blanket. They are really just holes with bits of cloth in between. When the boys sit up it looks like a poodle is rising up. I am not writing this to mock. How many tears roll down my cheek, for I am not used to such things from home. But it's not just me, it's everyone. You can imagine how the vermin reign here under these circumstances.

Today is Saturday. They're celebrating May Day here today. But I'm not even going. If it were a service, yes, I wouldn't miss it. Oh, for a church service! The children know nothing but collective life. By the way, today is the first and last day of rest for the whole summer. This is the May festival. It is always celebrated when the sowing season is over, whether it is in June or in August. Until now we were still sowing. In the past who would have thought that it would still be possible to sow in June. It hasn't rained yet, and there's a great heat, so there will probably be nothing.

The tractors should all be burned, because they don't work. We have to dig up the garden ourselves. And that is so hard. And I've hurt myself. I can't do it like I used to. The garden is doing well, but there is no rain. We have to pay a lot of taxes. For the small garden, for example, we have to pay a hundred rubles and deliver 12 pud of potatoes. That's what every family has to pay, whether it's one person or ten. We have to give everything, and there is nothing left for us.

There are no shops here. We are happy when we get matchsticks and salt. I can hardly remember when we had sugar and vinegar. Our children don't know vinegar at all nor pepper.

Everyone here has only 1 cow, whether it is a family with 1 child or with 8. We have to deliver 200 litres of milk from the cow. If you have one sheep, you have to give 2 ½ pounds of wool. Eggs every family has to deliver 100, even if you don't have a single hen. Our livestock is also heavily taxed. In addition, each family has to pay 400 rubles. But even then we still don't have peace. Then there is the so-called individual-taxation. Yes, and what if you simply can't pay it? You probably know what happens then.

The buildings are all decaying and will soon collapse. There are no men to put them up again. The roofs are all broken. The walls are softening. They don't give us time to caulk the walls. With nothing at all we have our will. Many people are homeless here. There are almost no trees left, they were all burnt in times of need. I will rather stop, because I feel that the letter could be confiscated.

You, dear sister, ask where the brother-in-law died. He and his son David, aged 15, were drafted to Molotov. But it was so terribly hard there and bread was so scarce. And so he didn't survive. David is still alive. Oh, how many tears Anna has cried! Heinrich suffers from a lung disease. His son Heinrich is lives no more; like my son Johann. Oh, I cannot write of him,

it makes my heart break. He was so good at home. He could not endure the 5 years to which he was sentenced. Alas, my child! His wife, Nutt, and their 2 children still live with me. Now she wants to marry Heinrich H. T. from Tsch., who has moved to Chelyabinsk. In May she went there to visit her brother, and they found each other there.

The men who are still at home here leave their wives and take others. The women do the same.

Well, I don't want to write everything, I want to see first whether you will receive this letter. Then please write at once. The steel nib is so bad, and if I want to buy another one, I have to drive 40 versts to P. I need a needle so badly. I lent mine and it (the needle) won't come back. I am supposed to mend and I have no patches. You can't even find a rag when you cut your finger and are supposed to bandage it. Tomorrow is Sunday. Then it's over to the dung heap. A hard day, and we only have 1 fork.

Now it's almost evening. I must stop. Oh, if only I could look in on you. Here many are still far, far away at work. Oh, my dear daughter Anna. She is at work in Domarovo. I feel so sorry for her. She has to work down in the dark shafts. Every day she has to go 60 metres underground in a pit cage. She has a lantern on her belt and then she has to drive coal. When do you think the poor people will join their own? Many women have gone there to live with their husbands.

My husband and Anna have been gone 9 years now in September! Oh, dear brothers and sisters, we long for you so much now. I am so tired of life. I only want to die.

It doesn't rain, so we have to go into winter completely naked again. No felt boots, no stockings, no gloves, no jackets, no coats. There are no warm nights here. It is very hot during the day, and when night comes, it gets cold.

Brothers and sisters, write all of us while we are still alive. If only we could also move to another country !

* * *

"Is Christianity already completely extinct among our people over there?" the reader may ask. - Evidence is available that this is not the case. The life given by God in Christ remains ineradicable.