

The Orenburg German Settlement

By

Aron Pries

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Translated & Edited by

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Introduction

These memoirs, dated 1976, were written by Aaron Pries, in which he presents a modest history of the Orenburg settlement, based on the cycle of annual harvests, from its founding in the late 1800s till 1976. It is clear from the latter part of the memoir, that his religious and political biases would have been at odds with the majority of Mennonites residing in Orenburg.

Nonetheless, these memoirs do provide an interesting insight into the history of Orenburg which may not be found elsewhere. Furthermore, they provide an insight into the views of those who adapted to the social and political changes following 1917 and persevered through the Stalinist years.

I have attempted to translate and edit these memoirs with changes made reluctantly, only to facilitate a better understanding of the writer's intent. Admittedly, some phrases and words were challenging to translate accurately. The author uses grammar that is outdated and occasionally resembling the Low German language, thus rendering some of his expressions as incorrect and difficult for online translators to catch. For the most part, I resisted the rewriting of phrases and sentences into more fluent sentences, in favour of Pries' original writing.

This account is divided into two parts: Pre-Revolution (Pg 3) and Post Revolution (Pg 14).

A note about the author:

After consulting with several reliable sources, both here and in Germany, I can say with a high degree of certainty that the author is Aaron Pries (#371078), son of Aron Gerhard and Justina (Koslowsky) Pries. Aaron was born in Gerhardsthal, Chernoglas, South Russia in 1886 and in 1900, moved to the new settlement at Orenburg with his parents. He married Anna Schellenberg in 1917. He died in the USSR in 1983. (While GRanDMA gives his death as 1969, reliable sources state 1983. Furthermore, he has dated his memoirs 20 March 1976.)

Founding to Revolution

More than 80 years have passed since our German settlement was founded in the Orenburg region. Young people often ask how so many people came together to establish so many villages in just a few years. By what means did they make the long journey? By horsepower? Did they bring cattle with them, and finally, what was the real reason for leaving beautiful Ukraine and settling in the harsh Orenburg region?

In order to understand this properly, one must familiarize oneself with the life and economic realities of the German farmers in those distant times. For German peasants, land use was not communal property as it was for the Russian peasants, which was often distributed according to the number of males in the family. With the Germans, all land in the village was divided into equal sections (usually 40-60 desjatine), which were never reduced in size and were entirely, property of the landlord. The landlord was allowed to use the land, rent it out, or sell it, but he was not allowed to reduce the size of the farm parcel itself. The purpose was to maintain sustainable farms.

After the death of the parents, the entire farm, with the buildings on it, was sold and the proceeds divided equally among all children, both male and female. Any of the heirs able to pay the other heirs their share was allowed to buy the farm. If none of the heirs was able to do so, the farm was sold to strangers. As a result of this arrangement, only one of the heirs could remain on the farm after the death of the parents - the others became landless. They were forced to either seek employment with rich people or become tenants of a large landowner if they wanted to engage in agriculture. There was still little industry at that time requiring labour. Such a system of landownership gave rise to a property-based world view among the residents. Everyone endeavoured to become a rich landowner, whatever the cost. This was achieved by exploiting the labour of others. As a result of this economic system, more and more people became landless as time went on. In the beginning, the situation of these landless people was not so bad, because they lived in the neighbouring and semi-urban areas. The landlord administrations, which consisted of landowners and rich farmers, were interested in getting rid of the discontented.

In the Orenburg region, they searched for and found estates that could be acquired at favourable prices. In 1892 and 1893, large tracts of land were bought from the landowner Djejev. This land was immediately surveyed into sections by authorised representatives of the district authorities. Each section was to consist of a village with 30-40 farms. After the land had been surveyed, all those who wished to acquire land were asked to report to the district administration. There they had to make a small deposit, after which they were given permission to settle and use the land. For the first 8 years they were to be exempt from all payments. In the fourth year, after settling, they were to start paying for the land, but the settlers were unable to pay anything for more than 10 years. In the years 1908 - 1910 the land debt was handed over to a bank. The settlers were supposed to pay the land debt and the interest accumulated on it to the bank over a longer period of time. These debts were eventually cancelled by the Soviet government.

Many people took advantage of the opportunity and made the deposit. The following villages were founded in 1894: Chortitza, Petrovka, Kantzerovka, Kamenka, Nikolayevka, Shdanovka, Feodorovka, and Romanovka. These settlers came from the Ekaterinoslav Governorate. The villages of Kubanka, Klubnikovo, Aliessovo, Stepanovka, Karaguy, Chernoozernoye, Kameshevoy, and Zelyonoye were founded in 1895. These settlers came from the Taurian Governorate. The resettlement was very difficult. The settlers had to form village communities in order to make application to the railway administration for the resettlers' tariff, which was only 25% of the usual tariff. That was the only help from the government at the time. Everyone had to be at the railway station on a certain day with their belongings and families. They did not take many things. Livestock was not taken along because it was much cheaper to purchase in Orenburg than to bring cattle from Ukraine. The prospective settlers had to wait several days until the freight wagons were ready. Several villages were loaded onto one train.

On 25 February 1894 the great journey to the new homeland began. The journey took 8 days and they arrived at Platovka station on the 4th of March. It was a very difficult journey for families with small children. When they arrived in Platovka, there were insufficient carriages to transport so many people to their destinations. In the sparsely populated area, there were few paved roads in winter. When they finally arrived, it was very difficult to find temporary accommodation. Fortunately, all the buildings in the countryside had been bought along with the land. They found their first accommodation in these poor sheds, storehouses and cattle sheds. It was very cramped, but it had to suffice - the next villages were too far away. Once they arrived at their destination, the settlers had to register with the local authorities. A more educated and experienced man had been authorised by the old district office to take care of all this. The first person tasked with acting as manager, was Dietrich Lepp, who was soon replaced by Dietrich Froese.

Froese served in this position for as long as circumstances required. Our settlement was attached to a Bashkiria district. This district did its best to collect obligatory payments from us, but they were not concerned about the welfare of the people. A man was elected in every village community to take care of all community matters. In all matters having to do with business and school matters we had an unrecognised, autonomous leadership, tolerated by the authorities and in which nobody interfered. The centre of this autonomous government was the manager, who became the unelected head of the entire enterprise. Discussion of matters concerning the whole settlement was carried out by elected representatives from each of the villages, gathered at the manager's house. All resolutions adopted there were recorded in minutes and carried out by the manager, and all financial matters relating to the entire colony were handled by this body. The colony's financial affairs were controlled by the old district office in Chortitza and a Revision Commission from our settlement. This organisation continued to exist until several years after the revolution, and then it dissolved itself because it was no longer necessary. Froese had already died by then.

Our settlement was still connected to the old Chortitza administration in several ways, apart from the land debt. Firstly, there was the fire insurance, secondly the orphan's pension and thirdly, the

barracks tax. At that time there was no compulsory state insurance as there is now. There were private insurance organisations that were not interested in insuring small farm houses. There were often fires because almost all the houses had straw roofs. In order to insure the peasants' houses, the Chortizer District office in Ukraine had for many years set up a fire insurance company that only covered the German villages. The German settlement in Orenburg was too poor to set up its own insurance, so it was decided to ask the Chortiza district to include our settlement there. Our request was accepted.

With respect to creating order with the orphans' care, the Chortitza District Administration decided to establish an orphanage office. This orphan's office also had an orphan's fund, where the orphans' inheritance was kept. This orphanage took all the orphans living in the German villages into its care, together with their inheritance. From the first day of the income being deposited, interest was added annually, and the capital increased. In order to manage this fund and to hand over the inheritance to the adult heirs, an elderly, reliable farmer was elected for life. It never happened that the accounts were not correct or that an heir did not receive what was due on time. When our settlement was founded, the oldest orphan in Ukraine was a man with the surname Kroeker. Immediately after establishing the settlement, a department of the orphan's office was organised here, but the administration and cash office remained in the Ukraine. Klaas Heide was elected head of orphan care here. Employees were elected in every remote settlement, but the cash register and management remained with Kroeker.

If, for example, a man's wife died and he was left with minor children, two men were chosen by the orphanage as guardians for the children. These guardians, together with a number of witnesses and the father, made an inventory of the family over the course of a month. Half or almost half of the estate, after agreement with the forefathers, was awarded to the children as inheritance. If the man had had to pay it straight away, he would have been ruined, but that's what the orphan's fund was for, so that something like that wouldn't happen. He owed it with interest and was able to pay it off over the course of 10-12 years. The children were charged interest from that day onwards. The children never lost anything. On the contrary, they were charged 5% interest every year. The debtor had to pay 6% interest. The children were allowed to receive the inheritance when they were of age, which was 21 at the time. If they wanted to receive it earlier, they had to have the consent of their parents. The duty of the guardians was to always endeavour to ensure the welfare of the children.

Buying wood and other building materials was not expensive. These materials were brought from the neighbouring villages to sell. You could buy enough building materials in Pokrovka and Orenburg, but cash was not readily available. The most important thing now was to sow as much as possible. Spring came a little late in 1894, which created an urgency to complete the work. Every village had to choose a place to settle and then measure out the village site for each one. The sowing did not take long, because there was very little ploughed land that could be used. More than 90% of the land was virgin meadow. The spring and summer were very nice. There

was a good harvest and yet the yield was very low because the total area that had been sown was quite small.

Farming was difficult, but the settlers had moved into their newly built houses for the winter. The buildings were very simple with walls made of rough clay bricks and roofs thatched with straw. The hardest thing was to cultivate the original meadow with horse power and small iron ploughs, which the settlers brought with them. The majority of the farmers could only afford one or two horses, so neighbours always combined their efforts to plough with the horses that they collectively owned.

Initially, there was only a small piece of land available for each farmer. The reclamation of the meadow took several years. The harvest yields only increased very slowly, which meant it was always difficult to get enough seed and bread. Some people starved; there was no extra income. There were many interesting things in the summer. There was the unforgettable steppe, with its green grass and many flowers, as well as various animals and birds that you couldn't see in the Ukraine. There were marmots, badgers and quite a few wolves. Among the birds there were especially many canaries, but they have all disappeared now. As sociable and cheerful as it was in summer, it became lonely and depressing in winter. When the snowstorm raged and one couldn't even see one's nearest neighbour, and wolves howled at night, it was scary and frightening for some people. It was particularly difficult for the students. Clothes and footwear were poor. Only wooden clogs (Schlorren) were worn. Settlers could not afford to buy felt boots, but despite all this, school was in session everywhere.

Some were not able to cope with this misery and returned to the Ukraine the following spring. But these were only a few; the majority stayed. So three to four years passed without any noticeable success in achieving economic stability. Only in 1898 and 1899, after the people had become accustomed to the region and the new conditions, did the situation improve. During this time, the wheat beer was almost empty. As difficult as it was in the beginning, a primary school was built in every village within the first two to three years. The schools had to be built with their own funds and the teachers were also paid by the settlers. The government at the time did not provide any funding. Until the schools were built, large rooms were rented for teaching.

Two problems caused the people great concern: postal connections and medical aid. There was no doctor in the whole region, not even a qualified nurse, and no pharmacy. In the summer, the time passed quickly, but in winter, with the long evenings, it was very lonely. There was very little entertainment. Newspapers were few and far between and always arrived late. The nearest post station was Pokrovka, 60-70 kilometres away. In order to improve the postal connection, a postman was hired to serve all the villages. A driver travelled to Pokrovka once a week and brought all the letters that had arrived there, to the schoolmaster, where they were collected. A doctor was also jointly hired by all the villages. A house was bought in Shdanovka and converted into an outpatient clinic and doctor's flat. As there was no hospital, the doctor was brought to the seriously ill, while the others travelled to the doctor themselves. This was very arduous, but

better than not having a doctor at all. Now the doctor could also give smallpox vaccinations and other health-protective measures. As the doctor was paid for by the community treasury, the visit to the doctor was free of charge for the individual settlers. Voluntary self-taxation was introduced to pay the doctor and the postman. Jakob Penner opened a pharmacy next to the outpatient clinic. These villagers had already settled into the new area and felt at home here. There were still six sections of land that lay uninhabited. The difficult start and the return migrants had somewhat dampened the desire of many landless people to move to Orenburg, but now, after good news came from Orenburg, it was decided to move again.

Several men visited Orenburg in the autumn of 1899 to see the area and the settlement. They liked the area. When they returned, they reported to the district office and paid the specified deposit. By the spring of 1900, settlers had registered for two villages. They prepared for the journey throughout the winter. Utilising the experience of the first settlers, these settlers took more things with them, including agricultural machinery. At the end of February the journey started with much the same difficulties as the first group had. In 1900 the villages of Pretoria and Suvorovka were founded and in 1901, Kitschkas, Dolinovka, Rodnitchnoye and Dobrovka.

The settlers of these last six villages came from the Ekaterinoslav Governorate. The colonisation of the purchased land was completed with these villages. A total of 22 German villages had been founded. Thus great poverty had forced many people to search for a home in this harsh region. The year 1900 brought a bountiful harvest, but in the following years they were very poor. The year 1901 was particularly difficult. The weather was very hot during sowing so that some of the settlers lost their horses through work, and in April, there was a thunderstorm. In Petrovka, a farmer, Johann Neudorf, and two horses were struck by lightning while driving home from the fields. In August, cold weather struck during the harvest. Another reason for the poor harvests was that the fields were not very well tended because there were still not enough horses and there were also a lot of gophers in the fields, which destroyed a lot of grain. In those years several small shops were opened where one could buy the most necessary goods.

In order to increase the sown field size, a seed fund was set up with the help of the home district office, where those in need could obtain the missing seed under the following conditions: in exchange for 10 pud of the new harvest, 11 pud. The bread supply issue was a little more difficult, but in the end they found a rich mill owner called Oberlaender, who lent the settlers the required flour until the next harvest. They had to pay him one ruble more per sack of flour (5 pud) than had it been a cash sale. It is difficult now to understand that farmers who sowed and harvested wheat did not have bread - they had to borrow it. There were few good harvests. The business expenses were always the necessary ones that had to be paid without fail. Income came mainly from the sale of wheat, which was cheap in autumn, so people were forced to sell everything they had harvested, and borrow bread and seed in the hope of the next good harvest, which would pay off all their debts. But it took several years before this happened.

Social life had become a little more uplifting. As there were large classrooms in the schools, evening song sessions were organised almost everywhere to provide the young people with some entertainment. New songs were usually practised on Tuesday evenings, and usually only the singers turned up. On Friday evenings the songs were sung, to which all those interested in singing were admitted free of charge. There were also more newspapers and journals. The teachers of the time did a lot to educate the young people. The most notable among them were Franz Lehn, Jakob Pries, Peter Dueck, Isaak Krahn, Johann Matthies and Johann Petkau. At the request of the teachers, small library corners were set up in the schools, for which the village communities provided the funds. These library corners were always administered by the teacher.

The year 1904 was a decisive year in the economic development of the settlement. Somewhat better prepared, the sown area could be significantly increased. The original virgin meadows had been completely conquered. At the time of sowing, it was cool and dry, and the seed could already be provided somewhat better. In spring and summer the weather was fine and there was enough rain to produce a very good harvest.

That same year several larger shops were opened where one could buy just about anything one needed, and where one could sell the surplus agricultural produce. In Pokrovka, several shops were opened that dealt in agricultural machinery. A roller mill was built in Kameshevoje. All this had a positive effect and made people more enterprising. However, the summer brought other worries that had nothing to do with the weather, namely the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War. The war had a major impact on all areas of the economy. Trade was immediately weakened, the taxes and obligations rose, and what was the worst for the farmers, the prices of wheat became lower all the time. Revenues at that time came mainly from the sale of wheat. In addition, great dissatisfaction soon made itself felt because of the difficult times. The defeats suffered by the army also depressed people. Although the economy was already stronger, further development was very limited. The winter months, although cold and stormy, were no longer terrible, the winter evenings no longer so long and lonely.

There were more and more books and newspapers, but the ongoing war dampened the mood. The spring of 1905 was early and dry. Sowing was quickly completed. Because of the drought, the grain grew poorly, and some areas remained black. A little later there was a lot of rain; the late sown wheat was better than the early sown, but there was a nice harvest for everyone who finished the harvest quickly. It wasn't easy though because it rained almost every day. There were grains in the wheat that had already sprouted, but people would have been able to cope with all these things if it hadn't been for the war. As the war continued, trade almost came to a complete standstill. The prices for the produce were so low that, after paying the expenses, very little remained for purchases of any kind. This was partly the cause of the great unrest that broke out everywhere. These conditions forced the war to end. Peace was made but there was still a lot of unrest, even though the people in the settlement had become calmer. There was now hope for better times. In our German villages and also in the whole Orenburg region, there was little sign of the unrest, but people were wondering how it could have come to this and who was to blame.

Although it was taught in the churches that this was all a great sin against the divine order, there were still people who did not agree with the prevailing conditions. There was not yet a realisation of the great injustices that prevailed, because politically, people were very ignorant. There was hardly anyone in the settlement who knew anything about Karl Marx or Friedrich Engels. Political newspapers were not read; people were very religious.

The winter of 1906 was quite cold with little snow, but the mood had become more enterprising again. The field work in spring was quickly completed. The weather in spring and summer was not favourable. It was dry and windy, and the average harvest was poor. But despite the fact that there was less wheat left to sell this year, thanks to the higher prices, the cash receipts were slightly higher than the previous year. The people now began to plant gardens, expand the farm buildings and improve the livestock. Common breeding stallions and bulls were bought to improve the offspring. Borrowing flour and seed was also no longer necessary. Many new machines were purchased to make the hard work easier. There was also talk of building a high school, but nobody yet knew how to start and where to get the funds.

The year 1907 did not see improved economic development. Spring and summer were again dry and windy; the harvest was very poor. As bad as the situation was, there were still people who were optimistic about the future. There were only elementary schools in the settlement. The people were too poor to send their children anywhere to continue their education. In order to give the young people the opportunity to continue their education, it was necessary to build a high school here in the settlement. This issue was discussed several times at community meetings, but to no avail. The majority were against it because they were afraid of large expenses. As there was no agreement on this issue, a voluntary association for the improvement of education among the German colonists of the Orenburg region was founded at the instigation of the old teacher Peter Dyck. A statute for this society was drawn up. According to this statute, each member was to contribute 50 roubles as entrance fee and in the future, pay 10 roubles per year for the upkeep of the school. Students were expected to pay 30 roubles per year in school fees. This statute was confirmed by the Orenburg governor, with the proviso that no help would be demanded from the government. The members then elected an administration of three men: Heinrich Koslowsky and Abram Driedger from Pretoria, and Johann Dyck from Karaguy. They were to manage the construction of the school and take care of all other school matters. The statutes of this company can no longer be found. This was all prepared in the first months of 1907.

At the beginning there were about 50 members. According to the decision of the founders' meeting, which took place in March 1907, the construction of the school was to begin in the spring of that year and classes were to start in the autumn. Preparations for the construction began in the spring. It soon became clear to the members of the administration that it was impossible to build a school with the membership fees; there was not enough money to buy building materials. At the plenary meeting of members convened to settle this issue, it was decided to ask for help from wealthy people in the old colony. The members of the administration were instructed to raise the missing funds in this way. Soon after the meeting, the

members of the administration, Heinrich Koslowsky and Johann Dyck, travelled to the Ukraine to carry out these fundraising missions. The success was better than expected. The men returned with several thousand roubles and the construction could be continued. In order to provide the school with the necessary furniture and teaching aids, help had to be requested once again. As the construction was not completed in one year, a room was rented from a resident of Pretoria. In the meantime, a teacher with a university education, Rudolf Riesen, had already been employed. On the first of September 1907, classes began with 17 students.

This is how the Pretoria Secondary School came into being; the seemingly impossible had become possible, despite the difficult year. What a large settlement could not achieve, a small group of strong-willed people did. This success was the beginning of the cultural development of the whole settlement. In the first winter months of 1908, teacher Rudolf Riesen died. Fortunately, his wife, Sinaida Schurolaponva, also a well-educated teacher, was prepared to continue teaching until the summer holidays. The next three years were uneventful and there were also good harvests. There were also changes in the secondary school, two new teachers were hired, a German, Goosen, and a Russian, Lastenko, so there were already two classes. Significantly more students had enrolled for the second year. This year classes took place in the newly built school. The secondary school, with its teachers and students, did much to spread progressive views among the people. Literary evenings were organised there, where plays by various poets were performed.

Everyone who was interested was invited to these evenings. There were also two evenings each week when the teachers gave scientific presentations. At these evenings, admission was free for everyone. These literature and lecture evenings aroused the interest of many people, especially young people, in political events in the world and in the country. It was an awakening to more free thinking. Books and newspapers were already plentiful. In the secondary school there was a library with beautiful books. The membership of the school society grew steadily. The children studied six years in the primary school and came for the seventh year to the secondary school. During these years it was decided to accept girls as students. Only four girls enrolled in the first year, but a start had been made; later the number increased. Only those students who wanted to continue their studies voluntarily enrolled.

The year 1911 began with good prospects. The winter had passed quickly. The cold time of year was no longer as difficult to bear. The farmers had been provided with everything they needed for sowing, and the land had also been well ploughed in the autumn. Everyone was confident of another good harvest. The spring was beautiful, the land adequately moist. Sowing was completed quickly without any obstacles. The grain came up nicely and the grass in the meadow was very good. Everything seemed to fulfil people's expectations. But unexpected things often happen, and so it was this time. At the end of May there were very heavy night frosts; the grain froze, and the land almost turned black. It wouldn't have hurt so much if there had been rain, but instead of rain there was intense heat. The grain started to grow again, but without moisture it couldn't mature. It only grew 15-20 centimetres and then it developed ears prematurely, which

only came out of the stalk halfway and couldn't flower fully. In the ears there were only 2-3 grains, and they were narrow because of the short growth period. It was almost impossible to harvest; large areas could not be harvested at all. Of what could be harvested, only 4-5 pud per hectare were threshed, about 60% of what was sown.

That was a terrible misfortune, but the mood was not as despondent as it had been 5-6 years earlier. The situation improved with respect to animal fodder. During the harvest and also later there was a lot of rain and a lot of green fodder was still growing. To remedy the grain shortage, cattle were sent to the Ukraine and sold there, and wheat was purchased. Many farmers still had some inventory from previous harvests. By winter, the people had collected the necessary seed and the required bread. The schools functioned without interruption and the number of students in secondary school did not decrease.

The year 1912 was another year of economic excitement. As bad as things looked in autumn, all the spring work was completed as usual. Spring came a little early. Work in the fields had already begun several days before the weather turned very bad again, with frost, snow, and cold rain, which prevented work in the fields for several days. Then it became fine again. Because the working horses were very lean and weak, the sowing took some time and was not finished until 10-12 May. On the 12th of May there was another very cold rain mixed with snow, which caused a number of weak horses to fall.

In Kitschkas, they had taken the young cattle and horses to summer pasture far away from the village on 11 May. As the bad weather continued and the cattle had to sleep in the fields without a roof, 30 one-year-old cattle froze to death in one night. Immediately after this storm, the weather turned nice again. The grain rose beautifully. All fears that the previous year's wheat was unsuitable for sowing were unfounded. The wheat was very thin, but had good germination. But again the rain delayed for a long time. It took until the second half of June before there was rain, and then there was not just one rainfall, but it rained every day for a fortnight, with warm air. There was big, beautiful wheat with full ears. During the harvest the weather was very nice and dry, resulting in a very bountiful harvest. Now the farmers were able to pay off the previous year's debts and make the necessary purchases. The year 1913 was the quietest and most beautiful year since the settlement was founded. In spring and summer the weather was fine and there was a good harvest and no serious illnesses.

The beginning of 1914 was just as beautiful until the harvest, which was also very good. Then came the terrible misfortune of the outbreak of war with Germany, Austria and Turkey, which became a world war. On the second day after the declaration of war, all the horses had to be brought to the district administration to provide the best ones for the army. Compensation for the horses was not bad, but it hindered a lot of field work. Right at the beginning of the war, many people from Germany and Austria, living in Russia, were sent to our settlement as civilian prisoners. They were to stay here under police supervision until the end of the war. Everyone had to provide accommodations for these prisoners. The harvest was beautiful and was brought in

with great effort. Horses were still being brought in for the army, but it became increasingly difficult to acquire others. The secondary school in Pretoria was closed because the teachers were called up. The outbreak of war and the appearance of the many interned civilian prisoners made many of our people wonder why such a mass killing was taking place. The foreigners who arrived, apparently our enemies, were just as simple people as we were and just as dissatisfied with the war. All this shook the old perceptions.

The year 1915 was a very difficult year. More and more reservists were called up and horses, grain and other things were requisitioned for the army. The whole country was full of prisoners of war from various nations. The fields were cultivated again in the spring, but the sown area became smaller. There was a lack of energy and even more, a lack of desire. Labour could be obtained from the civilian prisoners, but there was a lack of landlords. The old fathers and wives who stayed behind were unable to manage the farm work adequately. As bad as the sowing was, there was still a good harvest, thanks to the very favourable weather. As more and more civilian prisoners arrived, the secondary school was also used as living quarters for them. This is how the year 1915 ended.

In 1916, the war had become an evil that no longer upset people, it had become normal. Almost all the men who were able to work had been called up and the best of those who remained were still being selected and called up. Very young people have already been called up. They were sent out again, but no longer well provided for. There weren't enough men and horses; the harvest was poor. In the autumn of that year some deserters returned from the army, but remained hidden. Among the conscripts, who were much more familiar with the situation in the country and at the front, the mood became more revolutionary. At home it was less noticeable. The first schools were already closed and there were no more teachers. It was clear that things could not go on like this for much longer. The year 1916 ended under such conditions.

The year 1917 began badly. New groups were still being called up. Due to forced requisition, the livestock, especially the horses, became fewer and fewer. Grain stocks were also dwindling; more was consumed than harvested. It was very restless everywhere. Things were calmer in our villages, but not everything went well here either. The flats were generally overcrowded with civilian prisoners, which often led to arguments. The first revolution broke out at the end of February. The Tsar was overthrown, and a provisional government was formed. In our settlement, little was noticed of all this, but everyone believed that the war was now over. They were mistaken; the war continued.

It was different among the mobilised troops. The fall of the Tsar brought many of the conscripts into the revolutionary camp. Military councils were elected across the board to protect the rights of the masses. Holidays were granted. Occasionally, soldiers began to desert for home. The railway trains were always overcrowded with deserters, and it was almost impossible for civilians to travel. It wasn't just the carriages that were overcrowded; there were also people travelling on roofs, stairs and even on the buffers. There were also many accidents, but nobody

paid any attention to that. Despite all this unrest, the war continued. In our settlement it also became more restless because the harvest forecast was very poor. The harvest came and was brought in with the help of civilian prisoners, but the yield was very low.

During the harvest and also later there was a lot of rain, and a lot of green fodder grew. In autumn, a panic-like abandonment of the front began. Then the October revolution broke out and the veteran army began abandon the front. The mobilised troops from our settlement did the same. By 1 January 1918 pretty much everyone was home. The unrest grew more and more. The estates of the landowners in our area were also destroyed and plundered. The worst thing was that a lot of grain, livestock and machinery was destroyed. Few of our Germans took part in these events. The majority stayed at home and waited anxiously for what was to come. They did not yet have a fixed political attitude and vacillated between the many parties that existed. They were suspicious of the new things that the Bolsheviks were observing. The feeling of the landowners was still strong. What did the settlement look like at that time? The houses were, with a few exceptions, poor and many still had thatched roofs and had not been rebuilt during the war years.

The green spaces were small and poorly maintained. The medical service was very weak; one doctor in the whole settlement and he was not always competent, and there were several untrained midwives. This was the situation at the end of 1917. Not brilliant, but everyone hoped things would get better now.

The first students at the secondary school in Pretoria.

1	Bernhard Vogt	16	Wilhelm Herdt
2	Johann Pries	17	Fielipp Ertel
3	David Koslowsky		
4	Jakob Matthies		The first girls
5	Kornelius Matthies	1	Olga Schellenberg
6	Johann Dyck	2	Anna Loewen
7	Kornelius Ekkert	3	Margareta Bergmann
8	Franz Guenther	4	Katharina Dyck
9	Johann Guenther		
10	Peter Guenther		
11	David Wiebe		
12	Jakob Wolf		
13	Daniel Peters		
14	Jakob Quiring		
15	David Rempel		

After The Revolution

On 31 December, in order to encircle the White army, the Red army moved from Hynakbai, up the Uran to Kitchkas. That night, fearing encirclement, the White army fled in a panic. The carts requisitioned from our villages did not all return. The cart drivers, to save their lives, hid somewhere until the front moved away and came home without their horses and carts. On the morning of the first of January 1919, the villages were completely empty of soldiers. So from the first of January 1919 we have here a confirmed Soviet government. After the front had moved on, it became very quiet in our villages. There were various new decrees, but we were able to continue farming in peace. All schools were opened, this time entirely at government expense. Students were no longer required to pay school fees. Medical aid was now also free. Now it was so quiet, as if nothing had happened in the world, but that was only the case here, as civil war was still going on in the rest of the country. Several young men were called up to join the Red Army here, but few of them came back. Johann Nikkel and Johann Loewen from Pretoria did not come back. All the enquiries made by the parents were of no avail; no one was able to give any information about their fate. The people had lived through a very turbulent and difficult time, but now all the attention was again given to the farm. The winter was still not very cold and snowy.

Spring came in 1919 with very nice weather. The snow was gone almost within a week. During the sowing season the weather was also fine. Everything possible was done to get the fields well cultivated. The land had been neglected during the war. With the conditions of the previous year, it was not possible to prepare an autumn field, and yet the sowing area had become somewhat larger. Throughout the spring and summer the weather was very fine and there was adequate rainfall. The harvest was quite good, despite the inadequate supply of land. The harvest was accomplished without interruption but what else could be done with it? It was hard to sell products, even harder to buy the necessary goods. The shops were empty. The money was devalued, and free trade was not allowed. There was only one way left - the black market. People had to provide for themselves in terms of clothes. Clothes were knitted from wool, or woven on simple looms. For the rest, economic activity went on as usual, but all these difficulties still did not allow people to live peacefully and without worries, and the civil war was not yet over.

In 1920, it was calm and quiet in our area. Everyone was relaxed and a little tired from years of unrest. The winter was cold with little snow. The land was again prepared for sowing, but without any particular zeal. The civil war was still going on and this depressed the people. The world still looked dark. The spring was not very beautiful and a little early. The snow disappeared quite quickly with little meltwater. It was still a little early, but sowing had to start because the land was not very wet. The weather seemed to be as bland as the people. It was apparently nice and warm, but not like previous years.

Both the grain and the grass grew very slowly, and rain did not come. Soon after the sowing, the German and Austrian civilian prisoners were given permission to leave for their homeland. Within a few weeks they were all gone. The harvest was early and very poor. The government

imposed food rationing because there was hunger in the cities. The farmers were also very short of food, so they refused to give much away. But it was not possible without supplies. In order to get what was needed, the authorities were forced to apply strict measures. Special agents were sent with the military to search the houses of all the farmers in order to find hidden goods. Strict measures were taken against people who had provisions and did not surrender them. Hidden goods were seized without compensation. Since private trade was not allowed, several consumer associations were founded, but without employees experienced in trade, they could not achieve much, due to the great shortage of goods, and soon dissolved. It was to take several more years before the commercial associations were really able to fulfil their purpose.

In the autumn of that year (1920), gangs of thieves began to emerge, committing thefts from various citizens. Mainly livestock and foodstuffs were stolen. During this time, some of our people fared badly. Some of them joined with the thieves and also robbed, while others, however, exceeded in retaliation. When thieves were caught, they were beaten so badly that some died of the consequences, not from the authorities, but by people who had become vigilantes. Nothing was done by the District administration to change these conditions. In one such case, the citizens P. J. and K. L. had stolen sheep in company with two Bashkirs and were caught. The case came to trial in the district office. There it was decided to send them to Petrovka and hand them over to the People's Court. The thieves were transported on municipal trucks. On the way to Pretoria they were beaten so badly that they did not reach Petrovka and died on the way. The instigators and perpetrators of this murder were Johann Wiebe and Peter Vogt, both from Pretoria. The majority of the citizens were very upset about it, but the authorities did not call the murderers to account. Peter Vogt died at home a few years later and Johann Wiebe later emigrated to the United States. So these two murderers went unpunished. The majority of these thieves were ordinary, decent citizens who were only driven to this act by desperation and by hunger. It was a case of desperation for these unfortunates. If the much-vaunted Christian charity had been a little greater, many would not have become thieves. Even "decent" people thought it was acceptable to take valuable property from the poor in exchange for food. They lacked sufficient charity to assist the starving for free. The year 1920 ended under such circumstances.

The New Year was ushered in without joy. There were not even any sweets for the little ones. People were satisfied if they had some bread on the table. The world was still restless. The winter was similar to the previous one - cold and little snow. Spring came, the snow disappeared, and the seeds had to be planted again. As the previous year's harvest was poor, many people had few seeds, so the total area sown was not very large.

The weather was not good in 1921 - dry and windy, and it stayed that way in the summer. The land had not been well cared for after the war, and the consequences were a very poor harvest. Many did not even harvest enough for bread and only a few had anything left for seeds. In autumn there was a lot of rain, so that fodder could still be produced. The most important thing was the end of the war. Public life was still very low-key. Political organisations were not yet in

place, and religion still ruled life. From time to time lecturers came from the city and gave lectures on the political situation in the country and in the world. German members of the communist party were sent from other regions. They were all poorly educated people who were often unable to encourage people to think for themselves. The difficult years had very much dulled people's thinking. The poor economic situation weighed heavily on their minds. All the people's thinking was dominated by the question of bread because many of them had no provisions.

There was no hope of help from the District or anywhere else. The hunger was already very noticeable in autumn; there were many beggars in the villages every day. Such hungry haggard figures were encountered on all the roads; even dead bodies lay at places along the way. So we entered that winter with the anxious thoughts of what will we eat and what will we survive on. Without a lot of help, the majority were unable to access food. All the District meetings dealt with the bread question.

Various proposals were made to find a way out. Finally, they reached an agreement. There had been a good harvest in the Siberian German settlements. It was decided to gather clothes here, send some men to Siberia with these clothes and exchange them for wheat there. A lot of clothes were brought together. At the end of December the clothes were brought to Orenburg, from where they were to continue by rail. In spite of the shortages, school classes continued to be held in the villages, even in the Pretoria Middle School. This was the situation at the end of 1921.

Again, it was not a happy New Year on 1 January 1922. In Orenburg they tried hard for a long time to depart with the clothes, but in vain. It was not allowed because of political unrest in Siberia. It was exasperating.

In this extreme plight, help came from America. From there came a lot of food and also personnel to supervise the distribution of the supplies. In each village a man was elected who had to distribute the supplies in his village. Those who had run out of food had to register with the elected man, who put them on the list of the needy. With this list he went once a week to Klubnikovo, where the American representative, Hoepfner, lived and where the warehouses were located. From there he always brought the necessary provisions for a week. They were beautiful goods and free of charge. No one was refused.

The people became more spirited again, but something happened to spoil the good mood. As the railway administration had not allowed the clothes to be sent to Siberia, they had to be redistributed. The citizens Janzen and Harder were instructed by Chortitza to fetch the clothes from the District office in Kitschkas. On their way back with the clothes, they were attacked and murdered by a gang of criminals who were not identified. After this crime, the robberies stopped, and it became quiet. The winter was a harsh one with a lot of snow.

At the beginning of March it became known that a lot of wheat seed had arrived from America. Lists were requested from the District office as to how much seed each individual was to be

given. The distribution began halfway through March. Everyone had to fetch it from the elevator in Platovka. Now the mood improved again. Spring was a little late, but very dominant. The snow disappeared so quickly that there were several accidents. In Klubnikovo, a strong stream of floodwater came down from the mountains over the yard of Abram Warkentin. It poured through the door and into his house - so deep that a small child drowned in the living room. A resident of Deyevka, Johann Froese, who, with several other people, travelled from Orenburg and in a ravine not far from Aliessovo, Froese drowned in the floodwater. After the snow was gone, sowing began.

It was slow going at first because the horses were weak, but it soon got better. The grass grew so quickly that year that the horses recovered and became strong. It rained a few times during the sowing season, and the weather was also very nice in the summer, with plenty of rain. Rarely has there been such beautiful grass and such abundant grain. During the harvest the weather was dry and beautiful. The harvest was brought in quickly and was very plentiful. The bread shortage was over. It was generally quiet now, and there was no more talk of gangs. Life had become pleasant and enjoyable again. Public life had also become somewhat more cheerful, especially in the schools, where many progressive young teachers were now employed. According to the new teaching programme, religious instruction was completely abolished and scientifically based natural science was taught instead, according to which everything in the world had developed gradually and had not been created by a higher power in a few days. In the opinion of many believers, this was a great sin. Civil marriage and other progressive innovations were also not accepted by the majority.

It was difficult to fight against the old; the religion was too deeply ingrained. There are still many believers in the settlement today. The first person in our settlement to disregard this opinion and marry at the registry office was Johann Wiens from Kameshevoye. In that year a department of the People's Court was opened in Pretoria. The first People's Court judge was a German, Otto Germanowitsch Goerike. Court judges were also elected. Newcomers were always present at public court hearings and thus became familiar with the new laws. Since the judge was a communist, he endeavoured to interest people in the politics of the Soviet government. It started with lessons on legal issues. At this time another communist, a man from our settlement, Jakob Martens, came here with his wife, Amalia Katzendorn. He had studied Engels and had been sent here by the Party leadership. Soon Martens and Goerike had gathered a circle of like-minded people around them, many of whom were soon accepted into the Communist Party. The young people organised concerts and literary evenings.

Life became more interesting. During these years, Pioneer and Komsomol organisations were founded in the schools. It was a slow process - not all students wanted to join in because their religious parents didn't allow it. This caused friction between parents and teachers. It was only thanks to Jakob Martens' firm stance, that anything was achieved. That year, a modern consumer co-operative was founded in Deyevka. This is how the year 1922 ended.

The first of January 1923 was already a beautiful New Year. The winter had been a cold winter with little snow. Spring was late and sowing did not begin until the end of April. The summer was dry again, but without hot winds; there was a very nice average harvest. In order to end the bread shortage in the whole country more quickly, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (the NEP). Now every farmer was allowed to sow as much as he wanted and was also allowed to have contract labourers. This encouraged those farmers who had previously engaged in sabotage to work the land intensively again.

This opportunity was also utilised by many ambitious people. There was still a lot of ownerless land in the vicinity, which was used almost for nothing by hard-working farmers. As a result, there was soon a noticeable difference in the wealth of the people, which became ever greater. These people had no idea that all this hard labour, in which the whole family and even wage labourers participated, would become their greatest misfortune. They could not understand that the NEP was only a temporary measure. They were determined to get rich. In order to increase crop yields and clear the land of weeds, a number of farmers tried to improve the land through black fallow and sowing rye. As there were good results, this type of land cultivation was soon employed by all farmers. Peter Kornelsen in Kameshevoye and Tobias Unruh in Klubnikovo started employing black fallow. During the years of famine, a number of young people, the brothers Jakob and Kornelius Koslowsky and Peter Pries, moved to Central Asia. There, even before the revolution, a strong cattle industry had developed and cheese dairies had been set up, which collected the surplus milk from the farmers and made cheese from it.

These young people went there and learnt how to make cheese. After they had finished their training, they returned. As cattle breeding had also improved a lot here recently, they tried making cheese here. Townspeople liked to buy such cheese, but without much cash, not much could be accomplished. It took several more years for the cheese dairy to develop, but this was the beginning of milk processing in our settlement. In the same year, a consumer co-operative with a warehouse was founded in Kitschkas. There was another important event for our settlement. As the Bashkirs were not the majority of the population in the territory, our district was dissolved, and our settlement was attached to the Pokrovka district.

The year 1924 again brought a very poor harvest. It was a very hot summer without rain. The effects, however, were no longer as serious. Cattle farming was already creating revenue. Daily life became a little more pleasant, especially among the young people. The influence of Jakob Martens and the other Party members increased, but it was a pity that Jakob Martens was called to another area by the Party leadership, from where he returned to his mother in Rodnitchnoye after several years of illness and soon died there as a dedicated communist.

Although the harvest was poor, no one was in need and yet many people wished to emigrate to Canada. In 1922, a co-operative society called the Mennonite Association was founded in Moscow to help the American Relief Committee with the distribution and storage of food. This association may have been of some use to the relief organisation, but afterwards it was of no

further use. On the contrary, it was the source of the emigration fever that had been awakened in many people. Teaching actively helped all the people who came for this purpose, and the necessary papers were issued. After several years, this association was dissolved. In the same year, a consumer co-operative was founded in Pretoria, also with a warehouse. The prosperity of the settlement slowly increased. The demand for goods increased.

In 1925 it was another hot summer with little rain. Only by working the land with black fallow and sowing rye was an average harvest achieved. Cattle breeding now became increasingly important as a second source of revenue. In order to develop this sector of the economy, small cheese dairies were set up by the consumer associations, which bought the surplus milk from the farmers and made cheese from it. Contracts were now concluded with the municipal trade organisations and uniform prices agreed upon for the cheese supplied. David Froese, Bernhardt Vogt and Jakob Wolf, as representatives of the consumer organisations, negotiated a great deal in these agreements. Through their work, the settlement was supplied with goods and the sale of agricultural products was regulated. With the help of the regional department for agriculture, pedigree bulls were purchased in the Ukraine to improve the milk yield of the offspring. The economy revived more and more, and prosperity increased, but the emigration fever would not disappear. In this year Judge Goerike died. There were Komsomol and Pioneer organisations in the schools, and there was also a Party cell founded by Goerike and Martens.

Jakob Martens was dead, and now Goerike had died too. The Party cell continued to exist, but there was a lack of good leadership, which meant that the Party had little influence. The workers in the district were not all that bad, but they were non-Party members. In 1926 there was a very snowy, mild winter. Spring came rather late with heavy thaws. During the sowing season the weather was nice and warm. Immediately after the sowing was finished there was a lot of rain, and also later in the summer. We have not had such a rainy summer since we settled here, not even until now. There was a very good harvest. During the harvest period there was almost a month of hot, dry weather. Many farmers were unable to finish threshing during this time. The rest of the grain, which remained in heaps in the fields, was completely destroyed by the mice in winter. There was an emigration to Canada that summer. An English doctor came to check all those who wanted to leave. By autumn the emigrants had all gone and not very many of them were left.

That year the district bought a house in Rodnitchnoye and converted it into a hospital. A surgeon named Schestakov, and the other medical staff were hired and the medical facilities of the settlement were brought together in one organisation. A pharmacy was also opened next door. Classes in the schools continued without interruption, but with difficulties. The programme was changed several times, textbooks were lacking, and not enough exercise books could be obtained. Lessons were held in German and Russian. It was difficult for the teachers and also for the students.

In 1927 there was again only an average harvest. It was another hot, dry summer. In this year there were again various changes. The three agricultural credit co-operatives were merged into one, with the Litz in Kitschkas. Dietrich Siemens from Chortiza was elected chairman. In this year, the village districts were enlarged, and the administrative districts were dissolved. There were also changes in the secondary school in Pretoria. A new headmaster, a communist by the name of Martschenko, was sent in.

Under the influence of this man, fresh life soon came into the Party cell, and it grew larger by accepting new members. Komsomol and Pioneer organisations soon existed everywhere. The influence of the Party in public life grew. There were often meetings where reports were given on the political situation here in the country and throughout the world. There were also frequent scientific lectures by secondary school teachers. During these years, co-operatives were formed to work the land together: in Pretoria the Forward Co-operative with Tobias Boese as chairman; near Kamenka, the Red Star Co-operative with Heinrich Penner as chairman. These co-operatives were given land from the large plots of unused land held by wealthy landowners. They were given Fordson tractors and the associated implements to work the land. These were the first signs of a general change in agricultural production. All the speeches given at meetings revealed a hostile attitude towards the wealthy farmers.

There were various rumours about the horrors that were soon to come, but no one knew anything in particular. All this chatter made people uneasy; the situation seemed very uncertain. Meanwhile, the economy was progressing, and revenue was increasing. Several educated cattle breeders, animal experts, were sent from the district. Courses were organised to train their own specialist livestock breeders. Not only cattle breeding, but also pig breeding was included. The consumer organisations had also developed considerably and were already able to satisfy the demand for industrial goods and ensure the sale of agricultural products.

There was a good harvest in 1928. There was not much rain that summer, but the hot winds did not come, and the fields were well cultivated. Cattle breeding became more and more profitable. Almost all the surplus milk of the whole settlement was processed into cheese. The large amount of cheese that entered the Orenburg trade attracted the attention of the government. Several representatives of this organisation were sent to our settlement to familiarise themselves with the situation.

Following the report of this commission, the guest authorities decided to build modern cheese factories here in the settlement. The consumer associations were commissioned to manage the construction of the cheese factories. The authorities provided all the necessary funds. Under the influence of the Party cells, committees for the poor were formed throughout the year. In the summer of that year, there was a fire in Kitschkas in which the warehouse of the Credit Co-operative was consumed by flames, as well as a number of machines and other valuables. The cause of the fire could not be determined. Chairman Siemens was sentenced by the court to several years in prison for neglecting his duties. Apparently without reason, several more people

were detained in the settlement, some of whom stayed away. Gradually, a strained, tense relationship developed among the people. Despite the good economic conditions, nobody was really happy. Relations between the Party cells and the farmers had deteriorated. In 1929 there was again only a poor harvest. It was an unusually dry, hot summer, but in the resurgent economy people didn't notice it very much.

The income from livestock farming made the economy more stable. Three large dairies were built this year: in Pretoria, Klubnikovo and Deyevka. These cheese factories were equipped with all the necessary machinery and other equipment. Already greatly expanded, they are still serving their purpose. The years from 1922 to 1929 were good, with reasonably good harvests. The great famine was forgotten. There were always people who were never satisfied and only foresaw bad things to come, and who put people in a bad mood with their speeches. Apparently they were not entirely wrong this time. Very often there were general assemblies. Lecturers from the District came to these meetings and gave speeches. In these lectures, the farmers were accused, not without reason, of producing and delivering too little agricultural produce. It really was the case, but not all opportunities were utilised. The lectures were always hidden threats against the more affluent farmers.

The others were influenced against them. There was mistrust of one against the other. People were afraid of the future. In the autumn of that year, increased delivery quotas were imposed on the more affluent farmers and strictly enforced. It was clear from everything that big changes were coming. The emigration fever broke out again among many Germans. As nothing could be achieved here in the village in this matter, many travelled to Moscow to obtain permission. In the beginning there was also some promise. There was a mass movement, not only from here, but more and more Germans descended on Moscow from various regions. At the end of October, a small number were granted permission to leave the country. Then there was a standstill. Canada did not want to take in any more emigrants. After that there was a final cancellation. But as the people made no attempt to return voluntarily, the government used force. The emigrants were loaded onto railway trains with their belongings and sent back to their former places of residence.

The majority had sold their houses; however, the government declared the situation to be unjust, and everyone got their houses back. Before the people were repatriated, several family heads had already been arrested in order to persuade the people to turn back voluntarily. Many of those arrested never returned. They remained missing. The others all went unpunished. This is how the emigration fever was cured. Economically it did a lot of harm in that too much livestock had been destroyed. It was a very difficult winter for many. The year 1930 brought the much-feared major changes. At the start of the new year, the rich farmers, the kulaks, were dispossessed of their property - dekulakised. In many cases it was the peasants who became rich during the NEP period by exploiting foreign labour. They were not always the right ones. Some were resettled to other areas immediately, others in the course of the next few years. The people from whom land

was to be expropriated were determined by the Party cell and the Poor Committee. General assemblies were not convened for this purpose.

At these meetings it was proved to the farmers by well-informed people that an improvement in the way of life and the easing of hard physical labour by machines could not be achieved with individual farming. Only by uniting the farmers into large co-operatives was an improvement in the situation possible. They were then asked to unite and adopt the Kolkhoz Statute. Not exactly enthusiastically, the peasants gave up their independence and became part of the kolkhoz, but intimidated by the dekulakisation, nobody dared to oppose it. Thus the collectivisation of agriculture was carried out in 1930. A kolkhoz was set up in every village.

Now it is clear to everyone that the collectivisation of agriculture was a step forward. In the small individual farms it would not have been possible to replace the heavy physical labour of the peasants with machines, nor could progressive cultivation of the fields be carried out with small farms. Horse power could not achieve great improvements in agriculture and increase crop yields. In the past, an average harvest of 8-10 quintals was considered good, but now we harvest significantly more. The majority of farmers did not realise this back then. As soon as the statute was adopted, an administration of three men was elected in each kolkhoz to manage the business. Then everything was sold without payment: the livestock, all the agricultural machinery, the farm buildings, the seed and fodder. Each family kept one or two cows, a few sheep, the house, the furniture and the food until the new harvest, according to the family's inventory. The beginning of the collective economy was very difficult. The attempted emigration had led to the loss of many cattle. In order to strengthen agriculture, the government set up Machine Tractor Stations (MTL). These stations were given quite a number of tractors, with the associated implements of American origin. A number of specialists were also hired: agronomic mechanics and other skilled labourers.

Then courses were organised where the farmers were taught how to use all these machines. Contracts were then concluded between the MTL and the collectives. According to these contracts, the MTL had to carry out various land works for the collective farm. The kolkhoz had to pay for this work with agricultural products after the harvest. The standards and prices of these products, as well as the labour of the MTL, were determined by the government. Thus, all the work of the kolkhoz was controlled and supervised by the MTL. The MTL agronomists, who were not always good specialists, patronised the kolkhoz leaders, who were good veteran farmers. On the instructions of these agronomists, such methods of spring tillage were used, which no farmer can call beneficial, but they were forced to do it this way, i.e. to spread the seed prematurely with their hands in the hot and in places still frozen soil. The labourers were put under a lot of strain and the sowing was spoilt. It took several years before there were really good specialists and land cultivation improved and harvests increased.

The farmers later remembered the first director of the MTL, Jukin, with great praise, who always helped the chairmen of the collective farm with good advice. They could come to him at any

time with their concerns and he was never dissatisfied. He helped everyone to familiarise themselves with the unfamiliar managerial work. Political departments were set up in the MTL to manage the political work of the Party cells. This year, a German sub-district was formed in Kitschkas. The first chairman was Johann Peters and after him the second was Julius Unger, both communists from our settlement. This sub-district only existed for two years, then it was transformed into an independent district. The first chairman in the Kitschkas District was a German woman named Feistal, who was soon replaced by Stein. Both were Volga Germans. A German district newspaper, "Stalin's Way", was also published; its editor was Aeltner, a Volga German. A district consumer association was also formed, and a department of the state bank came here, which greatly improved the supply of goods to the settlement, which was a great step forward.

Life became more interesting. Only the old religious people found it hard to adjust to all the new things. The first few years in the kolkhoz there were rather poor harvests. As already mentioned, this was due to the poor management of the land. Most of the harvest had to be surrendered, so there was little left to distribute to the labouring farmers. It became very scarce again. From the cows that were socialised, dairy farms were set up in the kolkhoz. All milk from such farms was delivered to the cheese dairies for a fee. Even from the cows that people kept, 85 litres a year had to be delivered to the cheese dairies. That was not easy. People were still very poor. The work they did in the kolkhoz was estimated in daily units and only paid once at the end of the year, with grain from the harvest. In good years this was not bad - in bad years there was very little. There were also various payments and deliveries.

Particularly heavy was the state bond, which was issued every year and was quite high in relation to the income. For the servants it was usually a month's wages. It's hard to understand today how people managed to do that. But only through these efforts was it possible to build up our economy quickly. It was only after Stalin's death that better pay was introduced in the kolkhoz. In 1931 and 1932 there were poor harvests, so wages for labour were also very low. The state economy was not doing very well either. The people gradually got used to the kolkhoz. There were regular lessons in everything. There were already fewer disputes between parents and school because of children joining Komsomol and Pioneer organisations. People had become calmer. A number of teachers had also become Party members, including Gerhard Ens, headmaster of the secondary school. After finishing secondary school, some young people began to continue their education at higher educational institutions. David Goerzen, David Koslowsky, Heinrich Braun and several others dedicated themselves to the teaching profession. The consumer associations, which had become very inactive as a result of collectivisation, were also revived. Goods were still in short supply and a lot still had to be bought at the flea market, but the situation was slowly improving here too.

The collective farmers were often helped by their own vegetable gardens, which they were allowed to use. The year 1933 was a turbulent one. In that year the last kulaks were resettled. The resettlement was decided at village council meetings. A representative of the Party, called

Birjukotu, from Orenburg came to these village council meetings. In his speech justifying the resettlement, he said: "Recently there have been reports in the newspapers that the kulaks are committing acts of seditious behaviour on the collective farms. That is nonsense, of course. These people are frightened and do no harm openly. The matter is quite different. These people have relatives and good acquaintances among you, they weep for their lost property, and you weep with them. This has a very disruptive effect on the work in the kolkhoz, so they have to leave. Once they are gone, will you calm down and work? The kulaks will also calm down and work in the new place." The kulaks were resettled in the last days of August 1933 to a barren area far away from all villages.

They were supposed to erect buildings there, but apart from the most necessary furniture, clothes and beds, they had nothing and no building materials. They had to dig holes in the ground and cover themselves with bushes and earth, with winter not far away. This was very difficult for old people and families with small children. In the kolkhozes it really was as Biryukov predicted - people quickly calmed down. The harvest was very poor that year and the wages were low. Again, hunger threatened. School life had progressed more than agriculture. The schoolchildren were given hot food in the schools. In this year the German sub-district was reorganised into an independent district. In 1934 there was a good harvest, and the fields were already better cared for. There were now better agronomists and other specialists, and the kolkhoz farmers had also become good tractor drivers. The harvest payment was still only at the end of the year. A lot of grain was distributed to worker units this year. There was still little cash and clothing was still very scarce. When all the taxes and the government loan were paid, there was little cash left to buy goods.

In 1935 and 1936 there were average harvests, but a little more grain could be distributed among the worker units, so that many kolkhoz farmers had more stock than they needed for food. The consumer organisations had to buy this surplus grain from the farmers and sell them scarce goods. People were given receipts for the wheat they sold. They could obtain scarce goods in exchange for these receipts. For example, if you wanted to buy a bicycle, you had to sell five hundredweights (Zentner) of wheat. It was a somewhat difficult trade. Many of the people arrested in 1929 had returned home, including Jakob Ekkert from the village of Kubanka. He had a certificate from the camp administration stating that he had done heroic work in the construction of the White Sea Canal and was therefore released early. Everything looked good.

The year 1937 started well. The winter was not very cold with lots of snow. Sowing was not very early and was quickly completed in fine weather. At the beginning of the year, it was announced in the newspapers that there was to be a new constitution and then general, free elections for all authorities up to the Supreme Soviet. Once this was known, all residents were organised into circles of ten families. An activist was appointed for each circle, who, no less than twice a week, had to call together all the adults in his circle and read them a lesson on the constitution and the elections and explain everything that was not understandable to the people. Attendance at these

meetings was compulsory - no one was allowed to be absent, and everyone was expected to take part in the elections.

In the autumn of that year, the Kitschkas district was dissolved. Our villages were attached to four different districts. The harvest that year was very good. The work units were very well paid in grain. The consumer organisations had great difficulty in buying all the surplus grain. Everything went very well and yet people were a little depressed. Stalin's cult of personality became more and more noticeable. The year 1938 brought an average harvest. Once again there was a very nice reward for the labour in the kolkhoz. There was still a shortage of goods. In 1939 it was very quiet. The weather was not favourable for agriculture that year and there was only a weak average harvest, but enough grain could be distributed so that everyone had enough bread.

People were worried about something else entirely. The stock of goods in the shops became scarcer again and less and less was brought in. Then came such terrible reports of the war between Poland, France and other countries against Germany. There was a great fear of war, and it was a great hindrance to work. It was the same in 1940 and the harvests were poor. Work was very difficult. There was much talk of war. The year ended with great concern. The year 1941 began fairly quietly. The spring was not bad, and the sowing was finished very quickly. Then in June came the terrible news of the invasion from Hitler's Germany, and the terrible Second World War. This time was very upsetting for everyone, and a number of loud-mouthed and cheeky people were isolated and sent away from here. Otherwise it was quiet, but people had become anxious and very silent. The harvest was good and was brought in quickly in fine weather. Soon after the start of the war, many Soviet citizens who had been evacuated from the western regions came here.

They had fled before the invasion of the fascist armies in order to wait here for the end of the war. The majority of them were Jews who were in a particularly dangerous situation there. They were warmly welcomed by the people here and the good relationship remained until they were able to return to their former place of residence. There were rarely any arguments anywhere. The difficult situation at the beginning of the war affected everyone. The year 1941 ended and 1942 began in such a depressed mood. In that year, all reservists were called up to the labour army. For the most part, only underage boys and girls were left to work in the fields; all good mechanics were called up. It was a very difficult summer for the kolkhoz. Of course, these boys and girls could not fully replace the specialists who had been called up. The tractors were also old and in poor condition. This was the reason why the fields were soon very weedy, and the harvests became smaller from year to year.

Almost all of the harvested grain had to be surrendered. Only 15 per cent was allowed to be distributed, and that was very little. Then, in autumn 1942, our German women were called up into the labour army. Only those women who had children younger than three years were allowed to stay at home. People could no longer understand this. They felt insulted as Soviet citizens and set in opposition to other nations. In the labour camp, the women had to dig deep

trenches with spades and hoes in the hard frozen ground in terrible frost or snowstorms, with poor, unsatisfactory food. Only several years after the end of the war were they allowed to return home. In the next few years of the war, the harvests became increasingly poorer and there was almost nothing left for the workers. Hunger threatened again. Without their own vegetables, many would have starved. It took several years after the war for things to improve. It was only when new, powerful tractors arrived and experienced mechanics once again controlled the machines that the cultivation of the fields improved again, and the harvests immediately became more plentiful. Remuneration for work in the kolkhoz was still only at the end of the year.

Public life still remained very dreary; people were still not completely happy. The harsh Stalinist personality cult was still strong. Things got better when the MTS was dissolved, and all the equipment was handed over to the collective farms. Soon there was also a more certain cash wage and not just at the end of the year for the collective farm workers. Interest in agricultural labour increased immediately. The fields were cultivated better, and the yields almost doubled. More attention was also paid to livestock breeding and the fodder base was expanded. In the years 1950 to 1960, the small collective farms were united into large agricultural organisations. This gave the kolkhozes the opportunity to purchase ever larger and better machines. They are now large farms equipped with modern machinery. The life of the kolkhoz farmers has also improved considerably. Everyone earns well now. Nobody thinks about bread shortages any more. People have everything they need for a good life, an abundance of food, nice clothes, good furniture, not even bad houses.

Many have their own cars or large motorised vehicles. There are television aerials on almost every house. Everyone lives well. A lot has also been achieved in the collective farms in the last 20 years. There are now large Party organisations throughout the kolkhozes, and their influence is dominant in everything. Large, fully mechanised milking parlours have been built in all the kolkhozes, where milking equipment of various systems is installed and used. Only the fodder problem is still difficult. With the dry summers of the last few years. It is difficult to fulfil all plans in such years. There has been a lot of irrigation, but still too little to cover the increasing demand for good fodder. According to all prospects, the feed problem will also be satisfactorily solved in the 11th Five-Year Plan. Apart from the cattle sheds, there is also a lot of construction going on: beautiful two-storey administrative buildings and cultural centres have been built in the central settlements. New secondary schools have also been built. Instead of the one secondary school in Pretoria, there are now six secondary schools in the settlement, all with boarding facilities for the students living at a distance.

Particular attention is paid to the healthcare sector. Three hospitals have now been built in the settlement and medical staff have also been employed. Outpatient clinics for first aid have been set up in the other villages. A number of modern department stores have also been built. All around these new buildings, young trees and shrubs are being planted. Parks are also being planted in a number of villages. Many collective farmers have already planted fruit trees, mainly apple trees, in their gardens. Some already use their own fruit. Finally, I would like to mention

some of the leading people who remained loyal to the settlement in difficult times and endeavoured to develop the settlement progressively. Among the teachers were: David Goerzen, who worked for many years until his retirement and for several years afterwards in the primary school and later in the secondary school; Jakob Kliwer, who was an elected deputy in various posts for several years, then worked as a teacher in the secondary school until his retirement.

Kornelius Friesen was associated with the school until his death, even as a pensioner. Johann Matthies had only one profession as a teacher, several years in the primary school and then in the secondary school, until his retirement. His brother Kornelius Matthies did the same. Abram Fransen was a math teacher first in the Pretoria, and later in the Shdanovka Secondary School, until his retirement. Of the kolkhoz chairmen who served in this difficult post for many years and helped the enterprise in the difficult years of the Second World War, it was Jakob Janzen in Kitschkas who served in this post for more than twenty years and through whose leadership the kolkhoz became one of the best enterprises in the settlement. Jakob Olfert worked for several years in the consumer co-operative. Then he was elected chairman of the Spartak kolkhoz in the village of Kubanka. It was quite a poor economic situation he encountered there. As a good leader, he was soon able to interest the kolkhoz farmers in intensive labour and develop the economy into a progressive one.

In Pretoria it was Isaak Penner who saved the economy from economic decline during the war. In Shdanovka it was Gerhard Friesen and in Chortiza, Jakob Kehler. They were not always able to satisfy all the wishes and suggestions of the masses who were often ungrateful for their efforts. In the consumer co-operatives, it was Abram Kliwer and Johann Thiessen who endeavoured to supply the necessary goods. In the large cheese factory in Klubnikovo, Peter Wolf, in particular, rendered outstanding services. He was the master cheesemaker and remained in this difficult job for more than twenty years until he retired. There were, of course, other deserving people in the settlement, but more were not personally known to the author. My account covers the period from the founding of the settlement to 1976, when I was ninety years old. Since then I am almost completely room bound. My feet want to rest, and my hearing and memory also want to rest. I would be very pleased if any of the older settlers would come forward and add forgotten stories.

I would very much like younger people to continue to report on events in the settlement.

20th March 1976, Aron Pries