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## **Mennonites in Russia: Promises and Peril**

Marie and I want to thank for this opportunity. We are grateful to be able to share and reflect with you about our trip last fall to Ukraine, and about some of what it evoked for us. This will be partly travelogue, partly Mennonite history, partly theological reflection. We invite you into the story of the Mennonites in Russia, and the story of the Wiebe's in Ukraine.

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. I Cor 3:11.

These were foundational words for Menno Simons and they remain the motto for the Mennonite Church today. Menno Simons, dissident Catholic priest turned re-baptizer in the Netherlands who in the year 1536 joined the pacifist wing of the budding Dutch Anabaptist movement. Menno Simons, who then worked tirelessly and at great risk for 25 years establishing Mennonite communities in the Netherlands and Northern Germany, and after whom the broader Mennonite group was ultimately named.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation saw the rise of the Anabaptist movement in several areas simultaneously in Europe: in Switzerland (note Berne Menno's), southern Germany, and Holland. Most of Europe was rife with religious intolerance at that time, and non-conformists were tortured, drowned or burned at the stake, all in the name of God. This was true in Menno's Netherlands communities, too. The book *Martyr's Mirror*, chronicles the deaths of thousands of Anabaptists in such ways.

In Poland, the climate was quite different. Here religious differences were tolerated, and consequently the area around Danzig, Poland attracted many religious minorities, as various groups sought religious freedom and economic opportunities. Amongst the various groups that came, Dutch Mennonites dislocated themselves from the Netherlands and migrated to the Vistula Delta, too.

Dislocation became a theme for the Mennonites, as numerous migrations followed, as we will see. (Bulletin Picture)

It was in the mid 1500's then, that these Mennonite people moved eastward to new lives in Poland and the promise of a better future. This move afforded greater freedom from the threat of military conscription, the freedom to practice their faith as they wanted to, and offered the opportunity to practice their land-drainage skills, a highly sought commodity in the soggy Vistula lowlands. Their lives took root in this new place, and they flourished. Their distinctive ethnic identity shaped itself during these generations, and the rhythm and style of religious belief and practice took form in all its various details. Through hard work they turned swampy marshes into fertile farmland and created flourishing communities where religious life followed the beliefs and practices of the newly forged Anabaptist Christianity.

Things changed politically in time, and transitions of governments and realignments of borders resulted in eroding advantages and freedoms for the Mennonites in Poland the late 1700's. Freedom from military exemption began to cost them an annual payment to the Polish Crown, and access to new lands became restricted.

Along comes Catherine. Catherine, Empress of Russia. Later to be known as Catherine the Great, and revered by the Russian Mennonites forever because of the opportunity she gave them for a new start. The Mennonites were headed for another dislocation, this time again largely a happy dislocation for the most part, characterized by hope and optimistic expectation. Catherine, looking for settlers to colonize Russia issued a decree inviting Europeans to make their lives in Russia. All it took was an envoy dispatched to the discontented Mennonites of Poland, exploratory trips by Mennonite delegates Jakob Hoepfner and Johann Bartsch, and the next Mennonite move was on. In 1788 the first Mennonite families left the Vistula Delta trekking southwards towards the fertile land along the Dnieper River in South Russia. The first Mennonite colony in Russia was established at Khortitza, and after a few years a second was established - the Molotshna Colony.

In fall of 2008, we made a trek ourselves, a pilgrimage of sorts, to the land of our forefathers, as part of the Mennonite Heritage Cruise. 180 of us, people whose ancestors came from south Russia, travelled to Ukraine, independent from Russia since 1990, to the places where Mennonite life had happened, to re-engage with the story of that place and time: the story of the Mennonites in Russia, and the

particular stories of each family's life and history there in the Ukrainian Steppes. It was a cruise, the river boat Dnieper Princess serving as our home base and our "Floating Mennonite University" for 12 days. Beginning in Odessa on the north shore of the Black Sea we sailed to view historic sites in the Crimea, and then up the Dnieper River through the heart of what was once Mennonite country, and eventually to our termination in Kiev. The program was busy: There were historical lectures, there were out-trips to places of historical interest, there was worship, there were visits to places relating to previous Mennonite life in the area, there were films, there was a memorial service. There were outings for cultural enrichment: from a Ukrainian Opera in Odessa, to Ukrainian folk music on the boat, to a Black Sea Band and Choral Ensemble presentation in Crimea, to a final night Russian Men's choir concert in Kiev. In between we wandered streets of Odessa, Sevastopol, Zaporozhe, Dnepropetrovsk and Kiev.

From our berth in the city of Zaporozhe we travelled to sites of Mennonite historical importance. Surviving buildings from the Mennonite era, well-built in their time, gave concrete indicators of Mennonite life at that time. In Chortitza Colony we saw factories, schools and a hospital building. In Molotshna we visited the restored Petershagen Church, where my Great-Great Grandfather Dirk Warkentin served as Aeltester, or Bishop. In the villages, which we reached after hours of driving through the country-side, the basic layout of the one-street settlements are still evident, and life there today is poor, so walking down the streets of my parents' and grandparents' villages for example, with chickens foraging in the underbrush, ducks on the ponds, and cattle tethered on ropes in choice grazing sites here and there, as well as vegetable gardens behind picket fences, grape arbors over front walks, and fruit trees in the front yards, all of this easily evoked the rural life of the 1920's when my parents, as young children lived their last years there before their families emigrated to Canada.

Now, a confession: The story of our people, from Holland to Poland, to Russia, and later to Canada – in our case, but to other western nations for others, has been romanticized in our memories and stories and lore. We always come out looking

good, and blameless. We *can*, however find elements of our history less flattering – or at least pieces of the story which should give us pause.

So here then, for example, is a story of irony. (And it has long been interesting for me to think about the simultaneous occurrences in history: what was happened in one place significant in your history, when another event in some other corner of your story was happening? What was happening in the story of Jim’s Swiss background ancestors, for example, when Melissa’s forebears were leaving Russia? What was happening in Jan’s Swiss ancestors lives, when Greg’s were leaving Poland for South Russia? And are there congruent or contradictory themes involved? *This* story of irony bears such features.)

About the time when the Anabaptist movement was beginning, in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century another new beginning took place along the Dnieper River, on the island of Khortitza. 5000 Christian males were invited to come and man a newly built fortress or *sich*, the base for a newly established brotherhood which came to be known as the Zaporozhian Cossacks – the famous, iconic Cossacks of Ukrainian history and lore. These men: hunters, fishermen, horsemen extraordinaire, and warriors, would call the fort on Khortitza Island “home” for almost 250 years. The first line of defense against marauding tribes from the south, they played an important role in the history of Russia. While the Mennonites were creating successful lives and thriving communities along the Vistula River in the north, the Cossacks were carving their historic niche from a base on the Dnieper River to the south.

When Catherine, whom the Mennonites later fondly called “Great”, came to power and took control of those southern lands, she proclaimed the fortress or “*sich*” a “political monstrosity” and ordered its destruction. “Henceforth the use of the words “Zaporozhian Cossack” shall be considered by Us as an insult to Our imperial Majesty”, she stated, and henceforth she had her war hero, General Grigory Potemkin in 1775 destroy the fortress and obliterate the Cossacks for all time. 14 years later, this same Grigory Potemkin, introduced the first Mennonites from Poland to a site at the junction of the Chortitza and Dnieper Rivers, here to establish the first Mennonite Colony. And there, after initial years of struggle learning how to live, the Mennonites flourished and succeeded, they made good lives for themselves, here on the turf of the vanquished Cossacks.

Irony of irony, years later this theme repeated itself again, in the US of A and in Canada, when Mennonites relocated again, onto the turf of vanquished Indigenous people, or Native Americans. And each time, the Mennonites seem to have been oblivious to the self-serving irony of settlement on lands acquired by military conquest or other forms of indigenous displacement, only years later becoming reflective about these events then wondering, now how do we deal with this? (Even today, in 2009 in the province of Saskatchewan there are conversations taking place between the offspring of Mennonite settlers on Indian lands, and the offspring of Indian peoples whose lands are being farmed by industrious Mennonite farmers. What do we do with these difficult elements of our people's stories?)

A Cossack lament reflecting on the dislocation of the Cossacks for the benefit of the Mennonites reads this way:

“Hey, you, Empress Katyrena,

Look what you have done.

Boundless steppe and happy land

To landlords you have flung.”

And the foremost and revered Ukrainian poet T.H. Shevchenko put it this way:

“The prudent German plants his potatoes at the Sich

And you buy them and eat them with relish

And glorify Zaporozhe.

But with whose blood is this soil drenched?

What fertilizes this potato?”

But come they did, the Mennonites of Poland. Among them my (Marie's) fifth great grandfather Cornelius Regier and his wife Margaretha. Cornelius was the first

Aeltester or Bishop of the Chortitza Mennonite Church. My (Bernie's) various familial strands came to Russia (it seems from our genealogies), over a period of several of the early decades of Mennonite life in Russia. Our tour introduced us to places where early Mennonite life in Russia happened.

(Marie's (my) ancestor Cornelius died within five years of coming, his widow evidently went back to Poland, and the remainder of her (my) historical line was located in Poland, then directly to Canada. Bernie's folk lived out the promise-filled and eventually perilous story which follows here.)

In Zaporozhe we visited a building, now a community center which had been the Khortitza Mennonite Church. Here Marie's (my) 5th great grandfather served. Here he led in the worship of God and sought to discern Christian discipleship in a new land.

Their faith life, and the fabric and rhythms of community life established themselves in these Mennonite colonies, and industrial, commercial and political success followed. But who could know how short-lived their existence in Russia would be, and what contrasts would define these chapters of the Mennonite story.

128 years. This is the time span from the arrival of the first Mennonites in Russia until the events of 1917 when revolution resulted in anarchy and terror and which defined the beginning of the end of Mennonite life there. Only 128 years. A chapter which began with promise, included a long period of pastoral bliss, and in the end, peril, characterized by terror, violence, and destruction.

But life was for a period, gloriously successful for the Mennonites. Their hopes for themselves, and the Czarist's hopes about them – expecting industry and economic vigor, agriculture development and innovation, were realized. Their farming was exceedingly successful. Beyond farming the Mennonites were innovative and creative. They developed a mulberry culture, created farm machinery factories, and developed milling innovations. Cottage industries were developed and thrived. Craftsmanship and artisanship flourished. They built hospitals, schools, and publishing businesses, and they developed social institutions including orphanages, mental health services and social welfare agencies. And they entered into the political arena. One relative of mine, a Johann Esau became mayor of the large city Ekaterinaslav, now Dnepropetrovsk, and a couple of Mennonite men were even

elected to the Russian Dumas or Parliament. Many pursued higher education. By 1830 they were widely recognized within the empire for their successes and people of various ethnic groups were apprenticed to the Mennonites. This relationship probably created some resentments, and when violence came to their doors in 1917, their favored position in society came to haunt them, at the hand of one infamous Nestor Machnov.

Even during the “golden age” of Mennonite life in Russia, there was, however struggle and disagreement. Amidst power and glory, all was not idyllic. The civil leaders of the colonies disagreed with the church leaders, as they struggled for power and influence. It was the Aeltesters versus the Oberschultzes. Additionally, access to land was a perpetual issue - a result of the village design itself, limited to a certain finite number of units. Landlessness was an ongoing problem.

Religious fracturing was endemic. Mennonites in Russia entered the 19<sup>th</sup> century as one church, they left the century with 9 churches. Surprise, surprise, there were within the religious community, the innovators and there were the conservers. This dynamic came to be referred to as “Die Mennonitische Krankheit”, “The Mennonite Sickness”. Evidently, this condition lives on!

So while the Mennonites were exceedingly successful, and life was good in the villages, and there was no thought that their lives would need to change – except get even better, the romanticized images of our ancestors’ blissful and unblemished lives in Russia was not quite accurate. And of course there were clouds on the horizon.

A note here, in relation to a significant event that was happening elsewhere in the Mennonite world.

Marie’s (my) great grandfather Peter Regier who had emigrated from Poland (then actually Prussia) organized the Rosenorter Mennonite Church in the area of Saskatchewan where Marie (I) come(s) from. He was the grandson of the Cornelius Regier who had been the first bishop at Chortitza. In 1902 he hosted a historic meeting just down the road from where (I) Marie grew up. in his garden near Rosthern, Saskatchewan, a gathering of 9 men representing different Mennonite groups, including J E Sprunger from Berne, Indiana. The meeting laid the groundwork for the creation of the Conference of Mennonites of Canada.

In Ukraine visited several Mennonite villages. Even these 85 years after my family and so many others left, the basic layout of the villages in many cases still exist, including the presence of numerous original buildings. In my grandparent's village of Memrik we visited the cemetery and the re-set grave stones of my great, great grandparents, Barbara and Daniel Janzen. This was very significant for me - it felt very connecting to our Russian people and their story. We walked up and down the one village street past numerous Mennonite homes including the one in which my grandmother was raised.

In Steinfeld, my dad's village we stood by the school which he attended for one year in 1921-22. In the neighboring village of Gruenfeld, the church building his family attended still stands. This church embodies a story of redemption of sorts. Listen:

In 1909 the newly constructed church building was opened for worship. For only 20 years it functioned as a church, until 1929. My father up to the age of 8 attended there with his family. Just two years after his family left for Canada and when the Stalin years were taking hold, a local communist official closed the church and the Aeltester taken away, banished, and later shot. Over the time of the Communist years the church building was used at different times as a horse barn, and granary, a dormitory and club house and a cinema.

More recently, however, in the early 1990's a Russian Orthodox priest in the community acquired the property and had it renovated into an Orthodox church complete with the traditional onion-shaped dome. Before he initiated worship in this once-Mennonite church, though, he sought to receive blessing for such use of the building from someone representing those who once worshipped there. A Walter Wiebe lived in village, exiled to Siberia after the war and allowed to return to his village of Gruenfeld after Stalin's death. Through this man the priest was able to contact Mennonite leadership in Canada where upon Helmut Harder of CMC wrote a letter of blessing to the priest. This letter concludes with the words: "... That the Lord God will bless this place of worship and the activity that is carried on there." On Easter Sunday morning in 1993 the resurrection of Jesus was once again celebrated in this building.

Grandfather Warkentin was a pastor in the village of Karpovka. As a young man at age 21 he had gone into alternate service for the country. The initial exemption from military service the Mennonites had been guaranteed by Catherine in 1788 was threatened with changing regimes over the years. In the 1870's, the policy was changed so that Mennonites would be required to be conscripted and serve Russia in military service. For many this was enough, and 1/3 of the Mennonites in Russia emigrated to Canada and the US. Dennis *and* Greg Schmidt's families came at this time, in 1874, the entire village Alexandervohl transplanted from the dark deep loam of Molotshna, to the fertile soil of Kansas. One branch of Melissa's ancestors came from Mariawohl in Molotshna Colony, I believe during that time.

But policies softened and Mennonites were allowed to do Alternative service in the forestry, and there my grandpa served during the three years from 1911 till WWI broke out. Without even going home he volunteered to work as a medic in the Russian army. He worked at the front, tending to the injured. 6 years he served Russia in total, then, returning home in 1917. In the meantime the Czar had abdicated under pressure from the new Bolshevik movement, the Romanov dynasty was over, and some of you will remember the story about the execution of the Czar and his entire family.

The czarist regime had not been kind to the oppressed common folk, the revolution was understandable, yet violence begat violence and the inhumanity of the Stalin years which followed the brief period under Vladimir Lenin made the Romanovs look like benevolent landlords. The numbers of people who violently met their ends as a result of Soviet policies is estimated at 600 million.

Philip Yancey writes in one of his books: "On a trip to Russia just after the collapse of communism in 1991, I had a conversation with a Marxist scholar who was devastated by revelations about the horrors just then coming to light in his country. "I had no idea things like this were taking place," he said. "I became a communist with the best of ideals, to fight racism and poverty, to bring about a just society. Now I learn that we created a monster. We saw the evil in others – the capitalists, the rich, the exploiters – but not in ourselves. I have learned to distrust any utopian philosophy, especially one that set "us" against "them". The danger of evil is inside all of us, rich or poor, socialist or capitalist." The danger of evil is inside all of us. Alexander Solzhenitsyn later made a similar observation when he stated that the line between good and evil goes right through the heart of each person.

Lenin himself admitted: “I made a mistake. Without a doubt, an oppressed multitude had to be liberated. But our method only provoked further oppression and atrocious massacres. My living nightmare is to find myself lost in an ocean of red with the blood of innumerable victims. It is too late now to alter the past, but what was needed to save Russia were 10 Francis of Assisi’s.”

By the time my grandfather had returned from his years of service to Russia, and the war was over, the revolution had begun and anarchy reigned. Near the end of WWI the Mennonites were pleased to welcome the Germans, who briefly occupied the area, and the Mennonites warmed to their ethnic kin, but the locals were watching and taking note. Before long the Germans withdrew and the Mennonites, by their association with the Germans became easy targets in the dark and bloody decades ahead.

1919 was, in the words of our cruise historian, “total chaos”. 6 armies operated in the region. For the Mennonites the terrorist Nestor Makhno had the greatest impact. As various armies advanced and retreated, the Whites, the Reds and others, Makhno and his forces roamed the countryside raping, ravaging property, murdering and seeking revenge.

These pacifistic Mennonites, these followers of Menno, these lovers of the Sermon on the Mount – what were they to do? What would you have done? It is one thing to embrace pacifism and the mantra of “love the enemy” when there is no threat, but how do those beliefs feel when your valuables are being taken or destroyed, when your brother is gunned for no reason, and when your daughters are being raped. My grandmothers were young women at the time – about 20 years old. Imagine the terror when the hoof-beats of the Makhno gang were heard riding into their village. Who would be the victims tonight?

And so the people struggled: Do we take up arms? Can’t we at least defend ourselves? Are we just supposed to stand by as they violate or kill our loved ones??

In my mother’s home village of Karpovka several young men who joined the Selbstschutz, the controversial self-defense units, were captured, tortured and killed. Mom’s grandfather was captured, held for a time, tortured, and returned home a broken man, living only a few more years.

A week before my grandparent's wedding, Grandpa's step brother was shot. The family's machine shed, all cleaned and prepared for the upcoming wedding (a triple wedding involving three sisters) was first used for Uncle Abram's funeral. *Then* they held the wedding.

Another time mom's uncle was taken forcibly with horse and wagon, by the Red or White army, never to return. Great Aunt Helen made it her task to sit at the front window and watch for his return. He never came. His fellow captive Jacob Boldt finally did return home and was able to tell the story of Abram having finally escaped his captors, then becoming ill and having been taken in by a Russian woman until his death. Boldt and the Russian caregiver buried him together.

My father lost three uncles during that time. Few families were untouched by the violence.

### **Barbara Nickel poem: "In Church".**

Today's Psalm which Ron has read for us is a prayer for victory. It states "some take pride in chariots, and some in horses. But our pride is in the name of the Lord our God". Whom *do* we serve – the question we pondered on Memorial Day weekend, whom do we serve, in whom do we place our trust? And how much does it mean when we debate the question in a vacuum?

The major Mennonite conference sessions in Russia in 1917 and 1918 wrestled with the question of the Selbstschutz, or self-defense. In the end some groups took up arms, others did not. The record suggests that Mennonite retaliation itself further inflamed the Makhno bands – Makhno himself had worked for Mennonites for a time, and knew the precepts of belief of his pacifist bosses. Mennonite defensive violence against him generated increasing hatred, and retaliation against the Mennonite communities was the norm.

The struggles around this central Anabaptist belief of love for enemy were a huge issue. Simultaneously, disease raged, namely Typhus, a flea-carried disease introduced into the Mennonites households by the Makhno bands. Many died of this epidemic. Then, after the Bolsheviks eventually prevailed, collectivization of land took hold, and then, famine resulted and took *its* toll. These successive and overlapping hardships were relentless and demoralizing.

North American Mennonites were paying attention, and compassion for the suffering brethren in Russia resulted in the creation of MCC in 1920. Indiana was represented early on, and one Orie Miller from Goshen College was one of three delegates who made the trip over to initiate relief for the Russian Mennonites. At peak operation 140 kitchens were operating and feeding hungry people in South Russia. Feeding hungry Mennonites, yes, and also hungry Ukrainians. No discrimination. Jesus' call to feed the hungry carried no ethnic or nationalistic qualifiers. In addition to food, MCC sent tractors. This same MCC, begun in response to the plight of the Mennonites in Russia still works at recognizing and responding to suffering and oppression, in the name of Christ.

My father's area was hard hit by famine and he recalls as a small boy in Steinfeld receiving food through an MCC kitchen, set up in the village school. Standing there in front of that school building last fall I tried to imagine him there many years ago, grateful for the help of MCC. My dad, now 94 and still able to share with us memories of those days in Steinfeld.

In the 1920's some 20,000 Mennonites left Russia for the America's – mostly to Canada. Marie Nussbaum's people came at that time. My dad's family emigrated in 1923. My mom's left in 1927 soon after an official came to my preacher grandfather, questioning him as to his preaching – what *had* he told his congregation on a particular Sunday? My Grandpa, pastor of the congregation, reported having spoken from Romans: give to God what is God's and to Rome what belongs to Rome. He was reminded that he was being watched. Several of his minister friends had already been arrested and sent to labor camps – he knew the writing was on the wall. They left their beloved mother-country and left most of their family members behind in 1927.

By 1929 the border was closed. Now the population was captive, and as things only got worse, there was no more escape. Stalin's regime was cruel beyond measure and the policy of "dekulakization" was devastating– the removal of anyone who was perceived to be opposed the state could be taken. "The Great Purges" they were called, and an estimated 20,000 Mennonites were taken.

In my mother's village last fall, with the help of our interpreter Viktor we sought out someone old – someone who might tell us something of those days. We spoke with one Helena Glodkaya, a Ukrainian widow likely in her 80's , living in one of

the surviving Mennonite houses. She told of a certain Sunday in those days when as the Mennonite Church service was let out, Soviet officials gathered and removed all of the Mennonite men. In one sweep all the men were gone from the community, leaving the women and children. All of my grandmother's brothers, five, were taken away at that time, and never heard from again.

This Helena Glodkaya went on to recall how on another day later, this during WWII as the German front was advancing to their area, the rest of the Mennonites were taken from their village. All of them, forcibly taken and deported. She told of how those few scattered folk who were out and about came back home to the village, and everyone was gone.

The people were loaded into box cars and sent east and north, many to Kazakhstan, there to be dumped off the trains, left to fend for themselves. Many died in these unbelievably harsh conditions from disease and malnutrition.

Mom's cousin Jacob, a ten year old boy at the time survived it all and when later he came to Canada, told many horrifying stories. How as a small boy he had begged and scrounged from village to village trying to keep himself, his mother, and his two little sisters alive. Of the four only he survived.

But lest it all seem like a gloomy ending, there are accounts of survival and grace, and recovery, as well. My mom's cousin Neta, whose husband was taken in that sweep in 1936 or 7, and who herself was taken in 1943, and sent by boxcar to Kazakhstan, eventually made it to Germany, years later. She visited our folks in Canada several times in the 1990's, and was experienced as a delightful, positive person exuding joy in life, despite the harsh experiences she had had. The human spirit is resilient, and we do not know how we might come through experiences we have not known. Perhaps, as Viktor Frankl who survived the Nazi holocaust has said, it is largely a matter of the attitude which we choose.

Mennonite Heritage Tour. "The Floating Mennonite University". The experience engaged us deeply, more-so than expected, and this continued for months after our return, as the reality of the story of our family and the Mennonites of Russia was refreshed and enlarged in our minds, and as we digested all were learning. The recurring themes of promise embodied in new beginnings, repeatedly, and the perils encountered as the tides shifted and turned on the Mennonites and many

others. The paradoxes within those stories, and the questions of survival and faithfulness, and how does it fit together when you are an Anabaptist follower of Jesus. And as we engaged in the stories, deep considerations of how it was for them, and interjecting ourselves, how would we have responded?

I will conclude, as my grandparents did, when they wrote their family history in 1972, 55 years after they left home and family.

My grandfather's account concludes: "Looking back on it now, it seems as if we have been literally pulled from the fire. God has been with us; it is He who had brought us here. To Him alone be glory, praise and honor."

And grandmother concludes her story with the statement: "Our hope and prayer is that we might all remain steadfast in the faith. May the good Lord keep you all so that we might meet again in eternity."

May God give us truthfulness as we consider the questions of our lives, the power of Christian community and fellowship as we discern faithfulness together, and strength for each day as Christ's followers.