

KLEINE GEMEINDE

# Heritage Tour '95

*Peter & Paul Fortress, Petersburg*

By Delbert F. Plett, Q.C.

## The Tour Group.

The 1995 Kleine Gemeinde (KG) heritage tour of Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Germany is now history. In a moment of weakness I promised some of my fellow travellers to write a report regarding our experiences. I am fortunate that two members of the group, Jonas Toews of Whitemouth, and Pauline Penner of Swan River, have provided me with copies of their journals which has made the task much easier.

First of all, let me introduce the members of our group: Harold and Bertha Giesbrecht, Whitemouth, Menno and Pauline Penner, Swan River, Eugene Reimer, St. Jean, Jonas Toews, Elma, Manitoba, Dr. Wilbert and Arlene Giesbrecht, Abbotsford, Peter and Yolande Hiebert, Nanaimo, B. C., and Irvy Goossen, Moundridge, Kansas. Later in Berlin, we were joined by Paul and Priscilla Reimer from Pincher Creek, Alberta. They were a marvellous group of people to travel with and I thoroughly enjoyed their company throughout and the spiritual fellowship was wonderful.

Special thank-you to Harold Giesbrecht who was responsible for getting me involved as the tour host and also to my good friend Jonas Toews, who served faithfully as our group "treasurer", looking after the tips and group finances. I also thank my buddy James Urry, Wellington, New Zealand, for faxing me a lengthy letter of suggestions and tips on short notice. Jonas and myself used these recommendations as our guideline throughout the trip.

## Winnipeg to Kiev.

The main group left Winnipeg on March 27, 1995, flying to Toronto where we met the two couples the Wilbert Giesbrechts and Peter Hieberts whose flight arrived from Calgary. At 5:20 we boarded a KLM flight for Amsterdam. I sat with Jonas and we had a good visit.

The flight was pleasant and routine except that a lady got sick and the pilot called for a Medical Doctor. Pauline Penner has described this as follows: "[Dr.] Wilbert Giesbrecht came forward and right near us they worked on a sick lady and got her settled. Later she had a nose bleed, so he

[Wilbert] was there again. By the time we landed she was sitting up."

At 10:30 the next morning we boarded a 737 KLM flight to the Kiev. Jonas has written, "... a little later we got a good dinner, it was 12 noon — 4 A.M. back home." We had a little problem getting through the customs as the officer didn't see our Visas stamped right into our passports. After a quick huddle, and with Jonas' encouragement, I went back and showed him the page, after which he stamped us through, not saying too much.

The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite has a literature station in Cherkassy and two of the young couples serving there, Elroy Toews' and Kerry Giesbrechts, were "... looking through the door when we came through the luggage check." Jonas has written, "... sure was good to see them in a strange land." Wilbert and Arlene, Irvy and Jonas, went along with them to Cherkassy where they stayed for the night.

Having always been an avid student of military history, and especially the German Russian conflict of 1941-5, I followed some of the places we travelled in the history of the war by Paul Carol, one of my favourite historians. I realized that Cherkassy was the place where the German Army lost six divisions in a major Russian encirclement. Those people who were adults during World War Two will often have heard the name, Cherkassy, in contemporary news reports.

In his journal, Jonas Toews has described the market that they saw in Cherkassy which was typical of the markets we toured in various parts of Russia and the Ukraine. He writes as follows: "We went looking around in a department store. It's not like at home but looks fairly well stocked. Then to the Bazaar (market) which is something like in Mexico or Haiti. The meat market is in an enclosed place and very crowded. The meat looks good and fresh. There was a lot of cottage cheese, nuts, honey, slabs of lard and



*March 29, 1995. Hotel Rus, Kiev, Ukraine. Breakfast with guide Nina H. Hryshchenko and Ukraintours manager Larissa Ye. Ryazantseva.*

some milk. Outside there were all kinds of wares, clothes, flowers, live chickens and young goats. There were some trucks and small trailers with tanks on them to sell milk. People brought their own containers and had them filled by the tube out of the bottom of the tank."

An interesting feature of these markets and elsewhere on the street, was the rows of people standing near the doorway, with one or two items for sale, sometimes even food or other things from their home, to raise funds for some more immediate need.

#### Kiev.

The rest of the group was met at the airport by Nina N. Hryshchenko, our tour guide who accompanied us to the Hotel Rus in downtown Kiev. The accommodations were excellent and the location very central. The next morning we explored Kiev and found it to be a delightful and absolutely beautiful City.

Although I am not one to spend too much time touring Cathedrals, I was continually impressed with the medieval and especially the pre-medieval churches, going back to the

earliest days of Christianity in Eastern Europe.

Among these structures was St. Sophia in Kiev, which was named to honour the wisdom of Christ and which dates back to the first millennium. The simple and mystical religiosity expressed in the frescos and mosaic works speak well for the faith of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the spiritual strength which preserved it through 70 years of Soviet repression.

Before our departure I had several meetings with Larissa Ye. Ryazantseva, the Ex-



Group picture, Lavadia Palace, Yalta. Left to right: D. Plett, Peter Hiebert, Menno Penner, Pauline Penner, Eugene Reimer, Arlene Giesbrecht, Wilbert Giesbrecht, Bertha Giesbrecht, Harold Giesbrecht, Yolande Hiebert, Jonas Toews and Irvy Goossen.



ecutive Manager of "Ukrintours". She was most gracious in helping to fine tune some of the stops on our itinerary. It turned out that Larissa was a good friend of Tom and Nettie Ladobruk of Steinbach and I was glad to deliver her package to them.

We quickly realized that as the first Kanadier coming as a tour group, our interests did vary significantly in certain respects from other Mennonite tours which had come before us. I tried to explain the cultural differences for this as best as I could and found that the guides everywhere were most sensitive. e.g. To explain why only two people in our group had cameras and the reasons for this.

In Kiev, we elected Jonas Toews as our group treasurer. Since he was in Cherkassy at the time, he won the election handily.

#### Yalta.

In the late afternoon Nina, our guide took us to the local domestic airport from where we were to fly to Yalta. But the others who had gone to Cherkassy had assumed that we were leaving from the International airport where we had arrived which was 40 kilometers away.

Nina arranged for our plane to wait for 30 minutes. In the meantime, Elroy Penner was driving as fast as he could, and managed to deliver his passengers in time for the flight. Finally we boarded the 50 seat Ukraine Air Turbo prop which took us to Simferopol in the Crimea. The plane was old and uncomfortable but it got us there.

From Simferopol we met by motorcoach to Yalta, on the Black Sea, where we arrived at the Hotel Yalta at about midnight. This Hotel has 2700 beds and is 7 years old. The rooms all had a beautiful view of the Sea and coastline. Yalta itself is very Mediterranean in terms of architecture and landscape.

On Thursday we toured the City of Yalta, population 165,000. Here we realized for the first time that many of the people in the Crimea and Zaporizhya region are not terribly thrilled to be part of the Ukraine, since these areas were historically part of Imperial Russia.

The highlight of the tour was the Lavidia Palace, the seaside resort of the Czars. It was here that we picked up the KG story as this was where Bishops Peter Toews and Abraham Friesen came in 1873 to meet with the Czar to appeal for freedom for their people.

According to Peter Toews' diary, they left Borosenko on October 13th and arrived in Yalta on October 17th. On Sunday, October 22, they "attended at the 4 verst distant . . . Imperial palace, in order that . . . [they] might yet see the Czar. But we did so in vain and left for home during the evening, arriving [home] at 12 midnight on Wednesday the 25th."

Although the original palace was rebuilt in 1911, it was exciting to retrace the steps of our forefathers in their efforts to preserve their faith. We often felt their presence as we drove along the roads that they had

travelled and walked in their footsteps.

In Yalta I purchased an icon from an wizened beggar lady, a simple gold painted Crucifix, wrapped in yellowed newspaper — a symbol of unity and oneness in Christ.

#### Annenfeld, Crimea.

On the morning of March 31, 1995, we boarded the motorcoach on our way to Zaporozhya. Jonas Toews describes the countryside as follows: "The country along the sea is very rugged, a lot of grapes are being grown for wine in small fields, some on steep slopes. Medero wine is being aged in oak barrels in the sun. We saw some of the barrels lying outside. Along the seashore there are some palm trees but they are only twenty feet tall. There were some flowers on fruit trees. The road goes inland and once we are through the mountains it's fairly level and agricultural land."

In Simferopol we were met by Olga Shmakina, our guide for the Zaporizhya segment of our trip. Olga is famous for her extensive knowledge and expertise of Mennonite culture and life in the southeastern Ukraine. She has guided countless groups through the various Mennonite settlements, and better than anyone else, knows the folklore and history of the region. She has won the affection of her tour members, and deserves great appreciation from the Mennonite community for her selfless work.

As we drove north through the Crimea we saw ". . . nice fields of winter wheat and some large grain elevators, and orchards of apples and peaches. Most of the land is irrigated as the Crimea is dry. They have a large canal from the Dnieper River bringing water to this area."

After some searching Olga located the village of Annenfeld, which was the main KG village in the Crimea. Annenfeld was the home of Aeltester Jakob A. Wiebe who left

the KG in 1869 to form the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren. This group also left Russia in 1874 and settled in Gnadenau, near present day Hillsboro, Kansas. Others under Rev. Peter Baerg remained faithful to their faith and continued as a KG congregation until they too emigrated in 1874.

A number of people in our group had ancestors in the Crimean KG including Heinrich Wohlgemuth, great-grandfather of Jonas Toews, and the Heinrich Esaus, great-grandparents of Pauline Penner. Heinrich Wohlgemuth's parents actually lived in the village of Johannesruh, which was close to Annenfeld.

Later Heinrich worked for Cornelius S. Plett in Blumenhof, Borosenko, where he fell in love with their daughter Katharina. When Heinrich's family emigrated with the KMB, he refused to go the Kansas, and went to Manitoba instead. He married his beloved Katharina when the Pletts settled there the following year.

Back on the highway, the main road between Yalta and Moscow, we headed north out of the Crimea and into the Kherson region. At Melitopol a City of 106,000 we stopped for a washroom break at a theatre. The washrooms everywhere in the rural parts were non-existent and/or primitive and usually one had to pay something for the privilege.

#### Zaporizhya.

From Melitopol we turned east of the main highway, taking a detour and going through the western part of the Molotschna on our way to Zaporizhya. Since we only had two full days in the region we wanted a chance to see the Molotschna at least twice.

We drove through the original villages along the east bank of the Molotschna river including Blumstein, Lichtenau, Lindenau, Fischau and Muntau which had strong KG



*Village street in Fischau. A typical Molotschna streetscape.*

communities in the pioneer years of the settlement.

We stopped in Fischau to look at an old school building constructed in 1896. Although obviously not the same building, the school house no doubt still stood in the same place where dozens of KG children including Enns', Toews', Eidse' and Doerksens had attended school and where KG school teachers Gerhard Doerksen (1825-1882) and Gerhard P. Goossen (1832-1872) had taught.

In Neu-Halbstadt and Tokmak, population 60,000, we saw numerous buildings still standing from Mennonite times. After a two hour drive, we arrived in Zaporizhyya, a city of 1,200,000. We checked into the Hotel Zaporozhyya, the best in the City. Although only built in 1972, the hotel itself was not as nice as some of our other accommodation. The rooms and beds were good and the service excellent.

That night there was a light snowfall which was unseasonable.

### **Molotschna.**

Saturday, April 1, 8:45, we left on a tour of the Molotschna or Molotschnaya. The previous night's snowfall was almost gone. The Molotschna Colony, a settlement of some 500 square miles with 57 Mennonite villages, was established in 1804. It was here in 1812 that the KG was founded when minister Klaas Reimer and his group of fellow reformers held their first worship services. On March 21, 1816, they held their first communion in Petershagen with 33 participants.

The settlement is bounded by the Molotschna river on the west which has three tributaries flowing into it from the east. A row of Mennonite villages lay along each of these smaller rivers.

We started our tour by going east along the Tokmak River, the most northerly of the three. At Schoensee we cut across south to Friedensdorf along the Begim-Tschokrak, which feeds into the Kurusha, the middle tributary, in the next tier of villages.

We stopped in Landskrone, the next village to the east, where Jakob S. Friesen, founder of the *Steinbach Post* (present day Derksen Printers in Steinbach) was born in 1862. We looked at the remnants of the Mennonite church which had been badly damaged during the war.

Because of its huge hydro-electric dam, Zaporizhyya was a major military target in World War Two and so the battle front passed through the region including the Molotschnaya twice, once in 1942 when the Germans invaded and then again in 1944 when they retreated.

Going further east we went through Hierchau and Waldheim both of which had several KG families in their day. Waldheim was the home of Rev. Jakob Barkman who drowned in the Red River in Manitoba in 1875.

Turning back towards the west we drove



*Olga Shmakina, Eugene and Wilbert inspect the remnants of the school house in Fischau built in 1896.*



*The service at the Zaporizhyya Hotel was continental style and very gracious. Here the group enjoys their last breakfast in Zaporozhyya.*

to Alexanderwohl where we stopped and paid a surprise visit to a collective farm. The entire Molotschna area now consists of State and Collective Farms. The Mennonite houses still standing are used as homes by the workers. It seems that very few of the attached barns have survived. Friend Henry Fast of Steinbach told me that many were destroyed in the war while others were torn down and

used as building materials for new houses.

The workers on these farms had been resettled from other areas and probably felt less attachment to the soil than most of the people in our tour. At Rückenau — the ancestral home of all the present-day Steinbach Barkmans — we stopped for lunch; sandwiches and cold cuts.





*Bombed out wreckage of the church in Landskrone. Our tour bus in the background.*

From Tigerweide we turned south to Kleefeld in the southern tier of villages along the Juschanlee river. This was where Cornelius S. Plett, my great-great grandfather, settled in 1856 when the village was founded and where he also served as mayor. Unfortunately nothing was left of the village other than a pile of rubble where an old Mennonite building had stood until two years previous.

We drove east through Alexanderkrone where Johann L. Dueck and Johann Toews had lived. They were both great-grandfathers of Jonas Toews. We drove east to Neukirch where KG Aeltester Johann Friesen and two of his brothers — Prediger Abraham and Deacon Klaas — had their Wirtschaften.

We turned back and drove west through Kleefeld and stopped at a Russian village where we walked around another machinery park of a collective farm. It was a Saturday and so no one was working. Although it was cold and rainy, over 60 per cent of the seedling was finished and the winter wheat was several inches tall.

We stopped in Juschanlee which was the estate of Johann Cornies, the great Russian Mennonite social reformer. According to Olga some of the towering oak trees had been planted by Cornies. The KG were favourites of Cornies and they worked enthusiastically with his reforms where they did not conflict with their faith.

The estate was later purchased by a Reimer family who built a large manor house, which in my view was one of the best examples of Mennonite architecture which we saw.

Going west we went through Rosenort, home of minister Klaas Friesen (1793-1870),

my great-great grandfather, as well as many other KG. The next village was Ohrloff where Aeltester Abraham Friesen (1782-1849) and four other KG families had farmed next door to the great Cornies.

Of the Molotschna, Jonas has written, "The Molochnaya is a beautiful area, gently rolling and creeks running through it. The soil is quite black at places, but in many places it's lighter and subsoil showing through where it's plowed or ditches made. There is some irrigation. Very often a little ways from the cities we see many dachas, they are little places that the city people have here to get out of the city. Some are fairly nice looking buildings but they range all the way to little shacks."

Then we drove along the Molotschna River getting our second look at the oldest Molotschna villages settled in 1803 where so many KG pioneers had once toiled — Harms', Warkentins and Kroekers in Blumstein, Loewens and Toews' in Lindenau, Heidebrechts and Kornelsens in Lichtenau, Esaus, Enns' Eidses, and Fasts in Fischau, Wiebes and Fasts in Schoenau, and Koops, Reimers and Giesbrechts in Muntau. From Tokmak we headed home to Zaporizhya where we enjoyed a good supper and were ready for bed.

I must confess that I was somewhat disappointed after seeing the Molotschna. When I surveyed the buildings and region and tried to imagine what it must have been like in 1915, the peak of developments in Russia, I concluded that the East Reserve or Steinbach-Hanover area in Manitoba, had done quite well by comparison.

The major difference, of course, is that in

the Zaporizhya region the buildings were constructed of kilned brick, as no wood was readily available. Hence the buildings have lasted longer and are more impressive from that perspective. In a progressive area like Steinbach too, the tendency is to tear down the old and build new.

#### **Borosenko Colony.**

Sunday, April 2, 1995. We headed to visit an area some 20 miles northwest of Nikopol where the KG settled in 1865, known as the Borosenko Colony. By the 1870s the area had been incorporated as the Nikolaithal Wolost with its own local government.

As if by an omen, the day started with warm sunshine, something we had not experienced for a few days. We crossed the Dneiper over Chortitza Island, and drove through West Zaporizhya, a city of 120,000 consisting mainly of apartments buildings.

Pauline Penner has written, "Out in the country we saw . . . big fields, freshly seeded and winter wheat. Big yards of farm machinery, a big cattle farm. The asphalt is green. The guide talked about people stealing other people's garden produce. One person was caught and undressed for punishment."

This episode tells us how much history stays the same. In his memoirs, Rosenort school teacher and store owner, Johann W. Dueck already related of such problems during the 1860s.

We passed through Nikopol which was the City where the Borosenko people did their business. Five miles past the City we turned north into an area that was hilly and rolling. There were many surface iron mines and the area was quite densely populated.

The village of Blumenhof was the first village we wanted to see as almost everyone in our group had some grandparents who had lived there. We had some difficulty identifying the village, known as Alexandrovka in Russian. The village had now grown to a small city of some 12,000 people and spread out to the south over a large hill.

This made it impossible to identify its exact original location. We were assisted immeasurably by the map of "Borisenko and Seifertsland" which KG historian Royden K. Loewen found in *Peterman's Mitteilungen*. The map showed Blumenhof (Alexandrovka) as being to the south and east of the junction of the Basuluk and Soljenaja Rivers, which certainly establishes its general location. Hopefully further research can identify the site more precisely.

In his memoirs Johann W. Dueck mentions "a high red bank by the Soljenaja River . . . as later . . . an iron mine was established there." We were looking for this natural landmark, but also realized that given the amount of mining activity in the area, the red ore had probably been mined and hauled away decades ago.

After inspecting a war damaged community centre we walked to the river and down the river bank where we held our first Sun-

day worship service. It was a scenic spot by the water surrounded by banks of dried reeds which were as much as 12 feet tall. The rays of the mid-morning sun splashed over us and birds sang overhead; God's great outdoor cathedral.

Jonas Toews writes as follows: "Delbert read a letter that Peter Toews had written [from Blumenhoff] just after he had been ordained as a minister in 1866. Irvy spoke a little and we sang a song. I led in prayer. A group of boys were watching us and as we walked away one started singing "Happy birthday to you" in English. I turned back and tried talking to them but did not get very far. They understood I came from Canada and they asked if we got there by plane. I beckoned them to come along to the bus and there Olga could interpret. They wanted to know when we were going back and if we would come again. I had given them each a tract and Bertha gave me some candy to give to them and also to some girls that had come there by now. They seemed happy to get it."

After eating our lunch we drove north across the Soljenaja River passing through the Russian village of Scholchown. Unfortunately it was too wet to drive northeast along the north bank of the Soljenaja where we would have seen the KG village of Heuboden where the delegate David Klassen of Rosenhof, Manitoba once lived.

Instead we headed north. After driving some four miles, approximately across from where the KG village of Steinbach once lay on the west bank of the Basuluk River, we turned east towards the village of Nikolaithal which was the county seat of the Borosenko or Nikolaithal Wolost.

It was in this area that we all of a sudden realized why the KG had relocated to this area. This has never been written about in the history books and is something which one could only discover from a personal inspection: the area had some of the most beautiful soil one could imagine.

Some one called out, "Stop the bus" and before you know it the men were out on the field scooping up hands full of moist soil. It was black, loamy and from what we could see in the ditch cuts, at least three or more feet deep.

It was evident that the KG made a very astute purchase when they acquired the 18,000 acre tract for 10 ruble per acre. Credit for this goes to men like Johann Warkentin (1817-1886), Blumstein, and Isaac Harms (1811-1891), Lindenau, who were leaders in the often hotly debated decision to resettle 120 families, the majority of the KG, to the Borosenko area.

Our group included some of Western Canada's premier farmers and they were immensely impressed with the soil. The condition of the State and Collective Farms we saw here revealed that the area was much more productive and prosperous than the Molotschna.

The machinery parks contained newer and better maintained equipment. Jonas Toews



*Sunday morning worship service among the reeds along the Soljenaja River, Blumenhoff (Alexandrovka), Borosenko.*



*Between Blumenhoff and Nikolaithal. Jonas and Menno inspect the rich soils of the Borosenko region.*

has recorded that "... there was an almost new self-propelled swather built in Germany and a trailer full of bagged fertilizer with English printing on the bags." The area also included some hog and dairy farms.

In Nikolaithal we saw an old Mennonite flour mill. Heading further north we came to a village which Olga said was Rosenfeld.

It was very pastoral and scenic and stands as one of the best of many villages we saw.

Jonas Toews describes it as follows: "We stopped and walked around a bit. It's an old village with houses on both sides of the creek. We had seen many places with 3 inch pipes, 7 feet high running along the fence in front of the houses. Here we asked some women



what they were and found it was for natural gas, which had been put up 3 years ago but never finished. They also told us that Germans had once lived on the south side of the street. Here was a well with a drum turned by a crank to lift out the water. The top covering was of wood but further down the well was lined with stone."

As we were leaving, some old ladies (it always seemed to be the old Babushkas that had this knowledge) told Olga that the village was called Rosenthal and not Rosenfeld as she had earlier understood it to be. In my own notes I recorded that according to Peterman's map, Rosenfeld was some eight miles northeast of Nikolaithal whereas the village we had seen was to the northwest of Nikolaithal. From this I concluded that the village we saw was not Rosenfeld and settled later by other Mennonites, not the KG.

We continued north some twenty miles and then turned east, back towards Zaporizhya and home for the night.

#### Old Colony Villages.

Monday, April 3, 1995. We saw the Dnieper Dam, largest in Europe and second largest in the world, surpassed only by the Hoover Dam. Then we drove across Chortitza Island and toured the village of Chor-



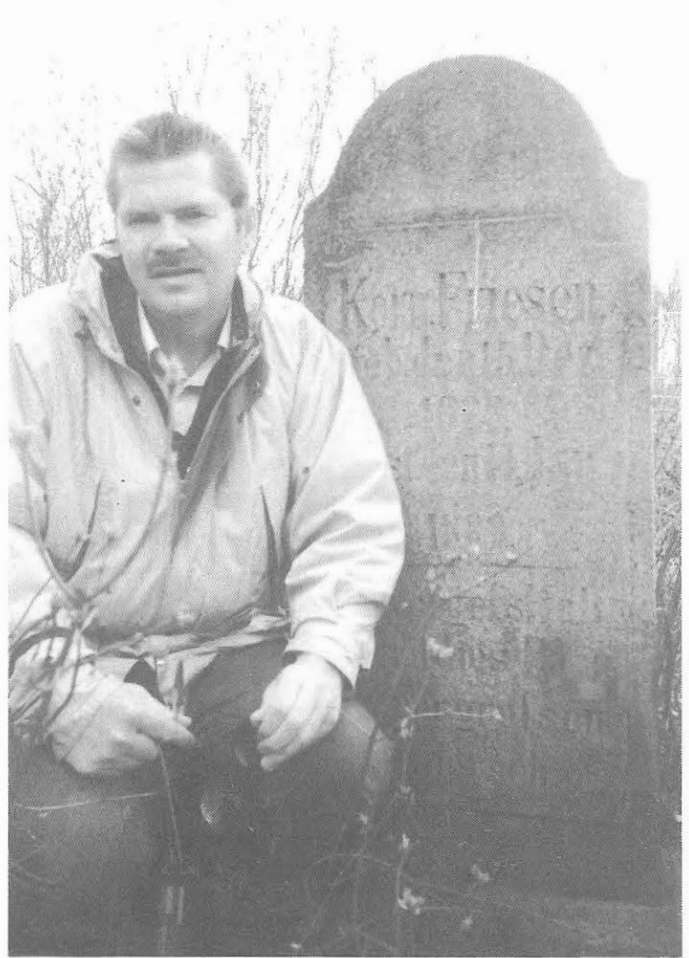
*Typical landscape of a former Mennonite village. Rosenthal, Borosenko.*



*Group picture at the "Thousand Year Oak" in the village of Chortitza, Zaporizhya. The boy standing on the branch of the tree provides a sense of dimension.*



*Chortitza Island, jewel of the Ukraine. Olga shows us the new and currently used Russian part of the cemetery.*



*The original Mennonite cemetery on Chortitza Island. Here the grave of Kornelius Friesen, 1820-1889.*

titza. We made the obligatory stop at the "Thousand Year" oak which is now dying.

Pauline Penner writes, "Here are many buildings of Mennonite origin. House and barn built together. Gebietsamt, Wallmans' mill, Mädchenschule, Dueck's mill. At Rosenthal there is a drug store, printing house, village school and Krüger clock works."

Then we drove back and stopped at the cemetery on Chortitza Island. The oldest part is a Mennonite cemetery and we saw many familiar names. We deciphered one stone which read; "Korn Friesen geboren 1820, gestorben 1889. Unvergesslich blieb dies paar. Einer grossen Kinder schaar."

It was interesting to see the newer Russian part of the cemetery. Jonas Toews has written as follows: "They have fancy stones with pictures of the deceased and fences around the graves. People come in there to look after the graves and leave some food on them. Tables with benches for them to rest on and have lunch."

We walked to a beautiful spot nearby from where one could view the entire City and the Dneiper River in a panoramic view. This was the burial place of Jakob Hoeppner, one of the two delegates for the Mennonites when they first immigrated to this area in 1789.



*The last resting place of disgraced Mennonite delegate Jakob Hoeppner (1757-1826) on Island of Chortitz. The scenic spot is situated several hundred yards from the former Mennonite cemetery. From here the original Mennonite settlers in 1789 had a panoramic view of the Island and Dneiper river in the background. Hoeppner's memorial monument was moved to the Mennonite Village Museum, Steinbach, Manitoba, during the 1970s.*



Hoepfner was later dismissed by his brethren in disgrace and had to be buried outside of the church cemetery. His memorial stone erected in 1889 was later removed and moved to the Mennonite Museum in Steinbach.

Our tour bus dropped us off several blocks from our hotel and we concluded our visit to the Zaporizhyya region with a leisurely walk along Lenin Avenue, enjoying the Kiosks and street vendors located at every corner.

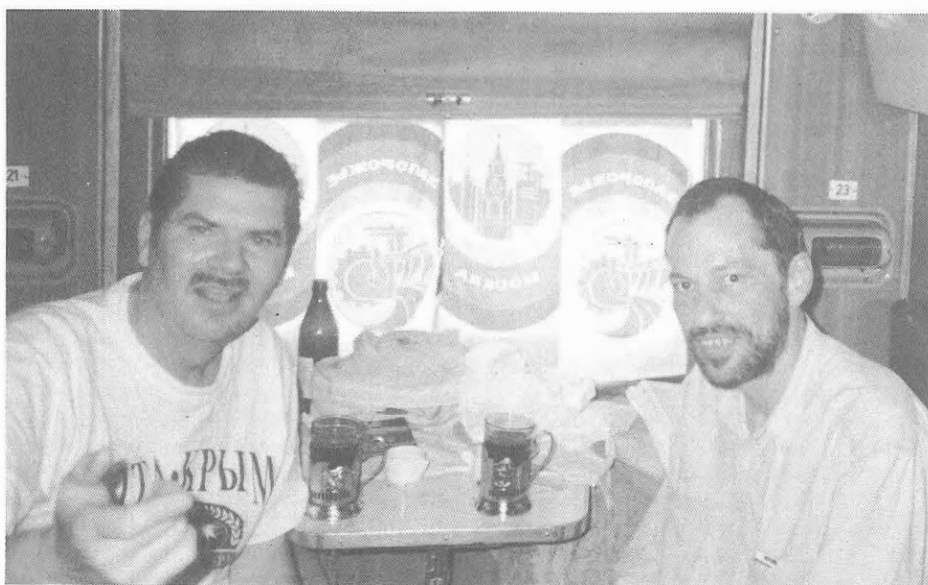
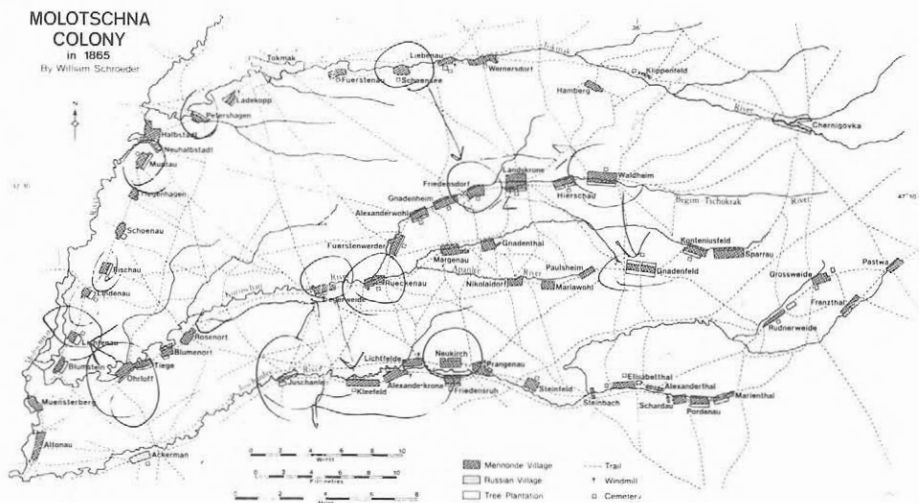
### The Midnight Train.

At 2:30 Olga accompanied us to the train station and we said "goodbye". By now it felt like she was an old friend. We were most thankful to our travel company as they had reserved two berths for each of us which meant that each couple could have a compartment to themselves.

By 3:30 the train was underway. At 11:30 there was a knock on the door. We were crossing the border into Russia and the customs officials and Russian soldiers were there to check us over. Everything seemed okay, except for Harold and Bertha. For some reason their declarations weren't stamped and this seemed to cause a problem. I went and sat with the officers in the compartment which they had commandeered. I handed out my business card to everyone with a uniform

### MOLOTSCHNA COLONY in 1865

By William Schroeder



Morning tea on the midnight train to Moscow.

Map #3: Borosenko Colony, ca1890



According to: Petermann's Mitteilungen 44 (1898), p. 169



Group picture at the Armory, Kremlin, Moscow, with tour guide Alexei Azarov.

and tried to keep smiling as graciously as possible.

Finally they left and we thought everything was okay. But half an hour later they were back, gesticulating and speaking Russian, of course. They did not appear to be looking for trouble and were as gracious as possible under the circumstances. Eventually they stamped the declarations and we got our passports back.

During the night the train stopped for an hour in the train station at Kursk, site of the largest tank battle of World War Two. The midnight train to Moscow was certainly an experience. As our group had two-thirds of a car to ourselves it was not as scary as it would be for a single person or couple travelling by themselves.

#### **Moscow.**

April 4, 1995. We arrived in Moscow at 12:00 noon. We were more than a little nervous about this connection as James Urry had warned me that the porters here could be worse than a pack of jackals. But our guide Alexei Azarov was standing on the platform waiting for us. What a relief!

We walked back to where our bus was parked. We were told that the travel company was looking after tipping the porters. As we took our seats in our comfortable motor coach we heard angry voices rising outside the windows. It was the porters and there were about twenty of them demanding more tip money. It seems that three or four of them try to touch a bag and each expect to receive at least a dollar U.S..

Moscow is a city of 10 million with 1.5 million cars. Average monthly income \$70.00 U.S. We stayed at the Hotel Belgrade which was conveniently located in the heart of the City.

Our cleaning lady spoke some German. Throughout the Ukraine and Russia I was constantly amazed at the number of people that had some knowledge of German. Notwithstanding that English has become almost universally the international language of business, it seems that in most tourist places in Russia and the Ukraine, German is as useful as English.

At 5:00 our guide Alexei took us for a walk along the old Arbut, a pedestrian promenade with peddlers, restaurants, antique shops and musicians, many blocks in length. We visited a department store and other shops. Naturally we also walked by the MacDonalds, located just down the street from our Hotel.

April 5, 1995. We passed the Russian White House or Parliament, where the shooting with the rebels occurred in 1990. We drove along the street where the government tanks came along to take action against the rebels.

Our first stop was the Armoury in the Kremlin, a huge museum of ancient times: crowns, thrones, carriages for the czars, dresses, and all manner of artifacts. We also walked through Lenin's tomb in Red Square.

It was quite cold and so Jonas, Eugene and myself bought Russian Army fur caps which were being offered by street vendors everywhere — \$10.00 U.S. In the afternoon we went to an outdoor market. Our group seemed to enjoy activities where they met the local people and saw what they were doing.

Alexei took us to the Metro, Moscow's huge underground subway system. After paying the \$0.12 fee, we took an escalator 100 feet underground to the subway station which had ceilings covered with artwork like a cathedral. It was very crowded even though it was not rush hour.

We rode the subway from one station to another. As we passed a squadron of soldiers marching through one station, the boyish-looking lieutenant noticed my army fur cap and gave me a wink and a quick salute.

Alexei showed us his apartment which consisted of six rooms, quite large even by North American standards. Most people in Russia live in apartments which are 2 and 3 smaller rooms, perhaps 300 square feet.

Alexei had an incredible sense of humour, and enjoyed regaling us with stories about events and various government leaders of the Soviet times. A typical joke: how do we know that Adam and Eve were Russians? Answer: They had to share an apple and didn't have enough clothes.

Later in the afternoon we stopped at a Russian Orthodox church where a worship service was being held. The singing was beautiful.

#### **St. Petersburg.**

At 10:15 we boarded the overnight train for St. Petersburg. It was a newer more modern operation than the Zaporizhya train. This time we were four to a compartment. We arrived in St. Petersburg at 8:00 A.M. Our guide Helen Martynova met us and ac-

companied us to our Hotel, also called Helen.

In the afternoon we had a City tour. St. Petersburg is a city of beautiful three and four story buildings and is criss-crossed with canals.

We saw the "Peter and Paul" fortress which was used as a prison during Czarist times. KG land reformer Abraham Thiessen referred to this prison, and many others like it, filled to overflowing with innocent peasants, in several books he wrote and published during the 1870s.

The KG elders Toews and Friesen came to Petersburg in 1873 to lobby for freedom from military service. But to no avail.

We drove out to see the Czar's summer palace located on the Baltic Sea, a 45 minute drive.

Saturday, April 8, 1995. We toured the city again. St. Isaac's Cathedral was definitely a highlight. It was huge, stark and austere. After dinner the group toured the Hermitage. Eugene and myself played hookey and walked up and down Schmolsky Prospect, the heart of social and economic life in St. Petersburg.

#### **Warsaw-Gdansk.**

By 7:45 we were at the airport and boarded our flight to Warsaw, a Polish Airlines 747. We had a good flight but it was raining and cold when we arrived in Warsaw.

The taxi drivers tried to tell some of the people in our group that Gdansk airport was closed because of the weather and that we might have to rent a bus. I walked across to the domestic terminal and confirmed that our flight was still departing as scheduled.

Our plane was a Turboprop ATR72, 64 seater. It was very windy as we approached Gdansk, and our plane was buffeted around



*The ancient harbour in Danzig, Prussia, now Gdansk, Poland.*





*Group picture with Dr. A. Rybak, Ladekopp cemetery.*

from side to side. Our guide met us at the airport and we were taken to the Hotel Marina, a beautiful new Hotel on the shores of the Baltic Sea.

#### **The Grosswerder.**

Sunday, April 9, 1995. From our hotel room windows we can see the waves rolling in on the Baltic Sea. We had breakfast in the dining room and our second worship service. Jonas Toews writes as follows: "Delbert gave us a run down of the villages where our forefathers lived here in Poland [Prussia]. He read a number of articles about Klaas Reimer, the founder of the Kleine Gemeinde. We closed with a prayer led by Irvy."

We headed out to the Grosswerder. On the way we picked up Professor Rybak, an expert on the Mennonite settlements in Prussia, now Poland. A few miles out of the city we drove by Neunhuben where KG founder Klaas Reimer farmed together with his wife's uncle Cornelius Epp.

We drove through Fürstenwerder where Johann Plett lived in 1776. He was a wealthy farmer who was the forefather of all the Mennonite Pletts. We stopped in Bärwalde where a Mennonite church had burned down four years ago. This village was the home of Peter Isaac, the ancestor of the Isaacs who later settled in Gruenfeld (Kleefeld), Manitoba.

In Ladekopp we stopped and walked through the cemetery. This was the village where Cornelius Toews, the great-grandfather of KG elder Peter Toews had lived. He was also a wealthy farmer.

We saw a number of house-barn combi-

nations with a porch in front, called a Vorderhaus. The second story of the porch was held up by pillars or columns. It was said that the wealth of the owner was indicated by the number of columns, sometimes as many as 8 or 9.

It would take too long to recite each village and the ancestors who lived there. Nothing is left of the village of Tiegenghagen except the cemetery. This was the heart of KG

country in Prussia, and home of Abraham von Riesen, Abraham Klassen, Jakob Reimer, Johann Loewen and many others.

The nearby village of Tiegenghoff has grown into a good size town. This was also home to many future KG families during the 1770s. Isaac Loewen, the ancestor of all the KG Loewens, lived here.

Elbing, now called Elblag, in the northeast corner of the Grosswerder was a beautiful medieval City. It had suffered severely during the war but is presently being rebuilt.

The hills to the east of the Grosswerder were 198 meters high. To the north, are sand dunes lying between the Grosswerder and the Baltic Sea.

We drove further east to Thiensdorf, meaning village on the canal, which was the home of Peter Hiebert's ancestors. From here we drove south to Marienburg, located at the south point of the triangular-shaped Mennonite settlement in Prussia. The Marienburg castle was built by the Teutonic Knights in 1357. It is the largest castle built of brick.

On our way back to Kdansk, we stopped in Heuboden, where there is a large Mennonite cemetery.

#### **Kdansk.**

Monday, April 10, 1995. We toured Kdansk, a beautiful medieval City. The architecture is breathtaking. We saw the harbour and the spot where the first shot of World War Two was fired. In the evening I walked along the beach, three miles to the wharf and enjoyed the pedestrian promenade in the centre of the City. A place where one could easily spend a week or so.



*A well preserved Vorderhaus, Bärwalde area, former Grosswerder, Poland.*



*The old city gate, Gdansk.*

"Kleine Gemeinde Heritage Tour 1995"  
Published by Crossway Publications, Box  
1960, Steinbach, Manitoba, Canada, R0A  
2A0. 1 (204) 326-6454.

#### **Berlin.**

Tuesday, April 11, 1995. Wake up call at 3:30. I confess that I was late as I did not get a wake up call, even though I had arranged it for everyone else.

At the airport, Harold and Bertha Giesbrecht had a problem as a seat was not reserved. I tried to help but no one seemed to speak German or English. A distinguished looking man nearby saw that we were having a problem and asked a few questions in Polish. I handed him my business card and he replied in English that he was from Finland and also a lawyer, here on business. It seemed that there was an immediate sense of collegiality between us. He was very helpful in translating for us and eventually a new ticket and boarding pass were issued for Bertha.

We flew through Warsaw to Berlin where we landed at 9:50 A.M. We stayed at the Forum Hotel, in the heart of the former East Berlin.

We enjoyed sight seeing and relaxing in the City for two days. It was here in Berlin in the presence of several other tour members that Irvy had his wallet stolen by a group of gypsy women.

#### **Onasbruk.**

Friday, April 14, 1995. We travelled by motorcoach to Onasbruk. The drive was very relaxing and the view of the prosperous German country was stunning. We drove around away to stop at the Nazi concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. A memorial service for the 50,000 Jews killed here was taking place while we were there.

We stayed in Onasbruk for two nights. We visited the Holdeman literature station in Schloss-Holte where we enjoyed a traditional home cooked meal courtesy of Lloyd and Alvin Koehn.

After dinner, Jonas took me and Eugene on a walk around town and showed us the apartment where his children had lived several years ago. We met George Brandt, one of the neighbours, who told us his story of how he had served in the army and eventually survived the war after service on both fronts. His grandfather was also a George Brandt (ca.1850-ca.1918) from Landskrone in the Molotschna. From his physical appearance I was sure that he must be related somehow to the Brandts of Blumenort, Manitoba.

#### **Amsterdam.**

Sunday, April 16, 1995. Our motorcoach picked us up at 8:20. Again we were delighted by the beautiful German countryside. We enjoyed a song service led by Irvy Goossen as we drove. Ten members of our group were continuing on for another two weeks on the so-called "European Extension". We drove into downtown Amsterdam to drop these people at their hotel and then we went to the airport and the long flight home.

On behalf of the tour members and myself, I want to thank Micheline Hay and John Schroeder at Assiniboine Travel for making our trip memorable and enjoyable. All our transfers connected like clockwork and it was a nice feeling to know that John was always only a phone call away.

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