THE OLD COLONY MENNONITES IN MEXICO

By

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Translation of *Die Altkolonier-Mennoniten in Mexico*
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Mennonite Heritage Archives
January 2021

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A machine typewritten copy of Erwin Jost's translation was found in the Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA Vol 4045 File1).

Note that both the author and the translator made comments in parentheses. The author's comments are in parentheses and the translator's comments are in square brackets.

Note that, since Jost's typewriter could not produce italicized text, he underlined all text italicized in the original book. This has been retained.

Scanned figures and photos from the original book have been placed at the end of the relevant chapter. Figure and photo captions were not translated.

Der Verfasser und seine Gattin in seinem Studierzimmer.

Foto: Ursula Heller

INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME "OLD COLONISTS"

The Mennonites of today grew out of the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century. This movement began in Switzerland and very soon spread to Moravia. Here Jakob Hutter and other Anabaptist leaders established the practice of joint ownership and communal living in the Bruderhoefen. Named after its foremost leader, this group was soon known as the "Hutterian Brethren." Their descendants are found today in the northern states of the USA and on the Canadian prairies.

From Switzerland the Anabaptist movement spread also to the north and west into the Netherlands, where, in 1536, Menno Simons became its best-known leader. Most of the church denominations that came out of this movement are named after him and are called "Mennonites."

Even though the Anabaptists grew out of the Reformation movement, a number of their fundamental beliefs soon differentiated themselves from those of the great reformers, Luther and Zwingli. To begin with, the Anabaptists emphasized the complete separation between the church and the state. The church and its members, they taught, must be permitted to obey the Word of God without any interfering prescriptions on the part of the state authority. Furthermore, they advocated their conviction that the Word of God must be the sole authority not only in matters of faith, education, and church regulations, but also in the daily practical life of believers. The true church, they insisted, was composed of those who had repented and openly proclaimed their decision to be obedient followers of Jesus by becoming baptized upon their confession of faith.

Because the Mennonites rejected infant baptism, refused to take the required oaths, demanded the separation of church and state, and declined to bear arms, they were soon persecuted in most European countries. Many were arrested, of whom large numbers suffered a martyr's death. Others found protection and refuge in countries or under governments that were more tolerant or granted them a large measure of freedom.

To benefit from such freedoms, many Dutch, Flemish, and Frisian Anabaptist/Mennonites left their homes and moved eastward into the Vistula lowlands, Danzig and Prussia. Here they gradually lost their Dutch language, which was replaced by the Low German of the area as their conversational language and High German as their church and written language.

During the first two hundred and fifty years of their stay in the Prussian lands, the Mennonites actually never enjoyed complete religious freedom and full civil rights. When in the middle of the 18th century it became more and more difficult to acquire additional land on which to expand their congregations, some of the Mennonites saw the invitation of the Russian government to settle in its southern territories as a call from God.

The Russian government promised the Mennonites complete religious freedom, including unconditional exemptions from military service and the swearing of oaths. Under this offer of privileges, several thousand Mennonites from Prussia settled in the Ukraine in 1788-89 and founded the Chortitza colony on the lower course of the Dnieper. Later, beginning in 1803, more settlers from Prussia founded the Molotschna colony. Other colonies were established later, either as original

settlements or as daughter colonies of the Chortitza and Molotschna settlements. In the course of these developments, the first settlement, the Chortitza colony, was commonly referred to as the "Old Colony," and its inhabitants were called the "Old Colonists."

Many of the customs and practices which the Mennonites later took with them to Canada and Mexico originated in Prussia and Russia. Their manner of conducting Holy Communion, their catechism instruction before baptism, their order of worship, the church holidays, funeral and marriage customs all became firmly established during their stay in Prussia and Russia. The same can be said of their civil institutions, such as the Waisenamt, the arrangement of their villages, their land division (Koerglsystem), their local administration through district offices, village mayor and first mayors [Schulzen and Oberschulzen].

After the Mennonites had lived for some eighty years in Russia, the Russian government began to take an active role in those areas which heretofore had been exclusively under the self-determination of the Mennonites, namely, in their local administration, their schools and language. In addition, the government let it be known that the Mennonites would no longer be exempt from military service.

Many of the civil and clerical Mennonite leaders believed that it would still be possible to work out an acceptable compromise with the Russians whereby it would be possible for the Mennonites to stay in Russia. They finally agreed to perform civilian service in the Russian forests as a substitute for the military service required at the time of all Russian male citizens. Many others could not reconcile this compromise with the Mennonite confession of faith. They saw emigration as the only alternative.

When they learned through the British consul in Berdjansk that Canada was offering land to settlers, many decided to take this offer seriously. Among them were a goodly number of Old Colonists, such as lived at the time in the Chortitza settlement and others who had founded the Chortitza daughter colonies of Bergthal and Fuerstenland. A large number of Mennonites from the Molotschna emigrants preferred to go to the USA, rather than to Canada.

1. Canada

During the years from 1874 to 1880 some seven thousand Mennonites came out of Russia into Canada, where they settled in the newly established province of Manitoba. They divided themselves into three church constituencies [parishes]: some three thousand were from the Bergthaler colony, which was under the spiritual leadership of Elder Gerhard Wiebe. Another three thousand came from the Fuestenlander and Chortitza colonies; they now united under the elder of the Fuestenlander group, Johann Wiebe. A smaller group of about a thousand constituted the Kleine Gemeinde, which had already in 1812 separated itself from other Mennonite churches in Russia.

THE PRIVILEGES

Originally the privileges which were promised to the Mennonites were stated in fifteen articles. These included, however, numerous purely technical matters concerning the immigration process, and therefore I shall note in what follows only the most important articles documented for the Mennonite delegates in a charter from the Canadian government dated July 23, 1873. These articles are as follows:

a) Complete exemption from military service
b) Free land on which to settle in Manitoba and assistance with the move to Canada
c) The freedom to conduct their own religious schools
d) Exemption from the duty of the oath

LAND IN MANITOBA

Originally the Canadian government made available for settlement by the Mennonites eight so-called “townships” in the province of Manitoba; and one must remember that at the time Manitoba was rather far “up country” and for the most part still awaiting the conquest of civilization. To a certain extent the Mennonites were to be employed as shock troops, and they did not mind. It was, after all, their best opportunity to continue here, on the soil of the New World, the time-proven work with which their fathers had opened up southern Russia. Then, too, wasn’t their location here, far out on the edge of civilization, the best guarantee that they would be able to continue their particular way of life undisturbed and unburdened by the outside world, perhaps for a long, long time, perhaps forever?

That seemed not at all impossible to these trusting immigrants from the slow paced, patriarchal and, in this respect, forbearing czarist Russia. Only later did it become obvious that an entirely different tempo ruled in America—that life here was faster than in the Old World, faster, especially, than in leisurely South Russia, and that what was still a wilderness today would within a year’s time become incorporated with unbelievable speed the push of civilization.

Already in the original fifteen articles that had been offered to the Mennonites on September 25, 1872, by way of a memorandum to the Dominion government by John Lowe, an official of the immigration

department, the thought had been expressed that a wider spreading of the Mennonites, that is, shifting them farther out to new frontier areas of civilization, was something that might well be taken into consideration. Specifically, it was stated that according to need, further "townships" were to be made available in the same manner as before for settlement by Mennonites.

FIFTY YEARS OF RESPITE

What happened after this already belongs to the more recent history of Mennonitism and is well-known from the writings of Canadian Mennonites. Regarding this history, we shall concern ourselves only with a transient epoch, with the migration of our Old Colonists; for our goal is, after all, Mexico. But it will not do to go over a period of fifty years in a single long jump. Not that during this period anything fundamental happened that would have had a drastic influence on the recent history of the Old Colony and its development to the present time. Basically, there has not been the slightest change in the life and the form of existence of today's Old Colony. The stay in Canada confirmed, so to speak, the past in its entirety. It represents an exact continuation of the way of life the Old Colonists had known in Russia, and if it had been possible to awaken an ancestor from the grave, say one from the year 1820 who had lived a hundred years ago on the banks of the Chortitza in distant Russia, he would immediately have found his way around in Canada and would have felt just as much at home in the year 1920 in the Western Hemisphere in the province of Manitoba as he had in Russia during his own time.

This was the same family here in the middle of the New World, situated on the same farmyard, laid out exactly as it had been in Russia. This family wore the same clothes, spoke the same language, not one letter changed, except, perhaps, for an occasional English word thrown in. The Sunday sermons were the same that this ancestor had heard in his day, delivered in the same old-fashioned manner in the same unadorned church. The same clock that had announced the hours of the day in his childhood was still striking here on the wall; and at the table, the same prayers were said, the same bread was eaten. As for the Bible, the Word of God, and the general view of life, this ancestor would, after more than three generations, indeed many more generations, find not so much as a single step of deviation from what his ancestors had recognized as right and had established once and for all.

I will be told that this is not so; that much, very much has happened in those hundred years: that new church constituencies have developed, new groups formed; that new lands brought new customs; that even Mennonitism has not stood still—that in spite of all its clinging to its confession of faith, it has moved along with its time, with its century.

Certainly! But I am pursuing a thread, the red thread, so to speak, of the Old Colony, which weaves its way through the entire history of Mennonitism. And there, where the farmyards and the villages stood in Canada, declining every compromise, defying every comparison, where the austerity, or, if you wish, the inflexibility persisted which later led to the migration to Mexico and South America, there it is again –the thread.

EARLY DIFFERENCES ON THE SCHOOL QUESTION

Soon after their arrival in the New World, the Mennonites found the stability of their community life threatened from the outside through an attractive but dangerous offer of assistance from the government. Elder Gerhard Wiebe, leader of the Bergthal group, reports on this offer and passes judgement on it as follows in his booklet titled, *The Causes and the History of the Emigration of the Mennonites out of Russia to America.* :

> We had been in America hardly more than a few years when we received an offer of money from the government to assist us in the maintenance of our schools, which, however, was very questionable to us, for we feared that through this assistance the freedom we had been guaranteed regarding our schools would be lost to us. But Hespeler said that there was no danger. So, we agreed among ourselves to accept the money. We then submitted the names of all our schoolteachers to Hespeler, and he told us to divide them into three classes. We asked him why. "Well," he said, "you certainly don't expect that the government will give its money to such as are cowherds in the summer and schoolteachers in the winter." Then this writer gathered up his papers and said, "Mr. Hespeler, now we understand. We will abide instead by the agreement made with our delegates."
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> He now quickly turned the thing around, and raising his hand, he said, "For now we will be looking through our fingers until you can do better." We then turned over to him the names of the schoolteachers, but his words had made such a deep impression on us that we didn't put much trust in them.
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> We soon became aware of the direction in which things were going, and we quickly retreated and took no more money. Oh, how glad we would have been if the Kleine Gemeinde denomination had done likewise and given us their hand in the matter. How much stronger the churches would have been! They did assert that as soon as they saw any danger, they too would decline to take the money, but it is the belief of this writer that the danger is already great enough, so that it is easy to see with the naked eye where things are going. The money has, however, so blinded their eyes that they no longer recognize false teachings in the schools, and those who are old pass away, and the young go from one stage to the next until the gospel is completely crowded out of the schools.

THE PARTING OF MINDS

We stand here at a turning point. Obviously, there was a parting of minds among the Mennonites after they had been in America "hardly more than a few years." It was a question of governmental assistance in school matters. As Elder Wiebe points out, the villages of the Kleine Gemeinde, which were

scattered among his own Bergthaler constituents, accepted the offer. Wiebe's own church, consisting of Bergthaler people, who had settled in the Eastern Reserve and who were known as the "Chortitzer Church", took the advice of their elder and the school staff and declined governmental aid for their schools. The group from Fuerstenland and the Chortitza villages in Russia, who had settled in the so-called Western Reserve and made up to Reinlaender Mennonite Church under the leadership of Elder Johann Wiebe, also declined every kind of government school.

A fourth group now developed, consisting of the Bergthaler people who had left the Eastern Reserve and settled near the Reinlaender members located in the Western Reserve and thereby removed themselves from the immediate influence of their brethren in the Eastern Reserve and their elder, Gerhard Wiebe. This group, eventually known as the "Bergthaler Church," soon adapted to some changes regarding some of the Canadian institutions. Teacher David Harder writes about this as follows:

> Since now the former, the Bergthalers, began more and more to participate in worldly affairs and also voluntarily instituted worldly (government) schools, voted in the election of government officials and even allowed themselves to be elected to government offices, there soon occurred a separation between the two churches, in that the so-called Old Colonists withdrew from the Bergthalers. And so, the Old Colonists took the name "Reinlaender Mennonite Church."

The initial co-operation between the two churches, the Reinlaender (Old Colony) Church and the Bergthaler Church, now became more and more difficult, even though the two groups had worked closely together during their emigration out of Russia. Even just the physical proximity of the Bergthalers to the Old Colonists made church discipline more difficult in the Reinlaender Church. Those of its members who were unhappy with the stricter measures of Elder Johann Wiebe were now offered the alternative of joining a less strict church. In any case, the number of "Abtruennigen" [disloyal ones] – a concept open to argument –kept increasing. Since also the passing of time made its imperceptible contribution to change, it finally got to the point because of the school issue that the table had to be cleared, and a general purgation took place. About this J.A. Enns reports as follows:

> …an official separation actually took place in Canada, but only in the church led by Johann Wiebe himself, since many of its members preferred the customs and practices of the Bergthalers and adapted themselves accordingly. And so the leadership could finally think of no other solution but to announce publicly that those members who were still in agreement with the educational services of the Church should make themselves known and become registered. Those members who did not request registration because they no longer were of the old opinion regarding the schools would for the time being not belong to any regular church.

Eventually most of the "Abtruennigen" [the disloyal] joined the Bergthaler Church or the somewhat more conservative Sommerfelder Church, which had built itself up with members from the Bergthaler Church in the 1890's under the leadership of Elder Abraham Doerksen.

DIFFICULTIES OF THE FIRST SETTLERS

We come back now to the immigration and the early years of the settlement.

Just as in any beginning in any foreign land, the first Mennonites in Canada did not have it easy. Only after many hardships did they arrive at their appointed place in faraway Manitoba. As yet no railroad

went there. They had to go up the St. Lawrence River by ship, then by way of the Great Lakes, and finally on a river steamer down the Red River to the place of the new settlement.

A number of families stayed in Ontario during the first winter, where they were taken in by German Mennonites of Swiss and Southern German origin. In Manitoba grasshoppers destroyed the first crops, and so the outlook was hard and dismal for the beginnings of these settlements.

But these immigrants wouldn't have been German pioneers, descendants of those courageous forefathers who had trekked to Russia a hundred years earlier, if they had not mastered the land and its hardships. And so, with their rock-firm trust in God and their willing energies, they succeeded. Farmyard after farmyard arose from the ground, village after village, settlement after settlement. After only a few years, the first difficulties had been cleared away, and when Lord Dufferin, governor-general of Canada at that time, paid his first visit to the Mennonite settlers in Manitoba in 1877, he found the new villages already in a state of steady growth.

LORD DUFFERIN'S SPEECH

Lord Dufferin, for whose reception the Mennonites had respectfully congregated on August 21, 1877, gave them a speech which I repeat here word for word just as he gave it, so that it may ratify once again what the Dominion government had promised the Mennonites from the beginning. They have always valued this speech as a historical document in which were affirmed once more in a most considerate and at the same time official form the conditions of their life and the prospects for their future in Canada. The speech was as follows:

Citizens of Canada and subjects of Her Majesty:

I have come here today in the name of the Queen of England to welcome you on Canadian soil. With this greeting are combined the best wishes of the Royal Government in Ottawa, for you undoubtedly know that your coming here is looked upon from both sides with undiminished good will.

The convictions of your conscience caused you to leave your home, nor are you the first who have crossed the Atlantic Ocean under the pressure of similar circumstances. To accomplish this, you must have made great sacrifices, broken many a tender bond, and given up the comfort of your once peaceful life.

In that you preferred emigration with its many hardships and dangers to giving up your religious conviction concerning the legitimacy of war, you have shown us that you are worthy of our esteem, our trust, and our respect.

You have come into a land in which you will find the inhabitants with whom you will come in contact engaged in a great struggle against enemies that can be defeated only with the greatest of effort. But these enemies are not your fellow citizens; nor will you be forced to stain your hands with human blood contrary to your religious feelings. The struggle to which we challenge you as recruits and comrades is a struggle against untamed Nature. But powerful Nature will welcome our mastery and will reward our assault by relinquishing its treasures to us.

It is a struggle that we intend to win—to conquer the land; but no burning villages or devasted fields are to mark our advance. Like the shining sun coursing across the oceans, our warriors shall march across unbordered plains spread out before us. The prairie will bloom, and crops will flourish in peace and abundance in our footsteps.

Nor are we alone in this rewarding undertaking, for the only nation with which we can come in close contact is engaged in a similar peaceful pursuit. It, as we, is striving to carry westward the banner of civilization, not as an adversary, but as an ally. And the common interest of our struggle and our goals has already begun to weave a bond between us and the citizens of the United States, which we hope will unite us in undissolvable friendship.

If then, you have chosen this land as a place of peace, peace we can promise you.

But I welcome you to share more than the material blessings of this land. We also wish for you to share with us our insured liberties, the institutions of your commonwealth, and the personal freedom of movement. We invite you to elect with us the members of our parliament, to deliberate with us concerning our laws, and to help us shape our future.

As free citizens we enjoy no rights or powers that we are not ready to share with you, and together with free citizenship, we offer you at the same time complete freedom of religion.

The church customs that you practiced abroad you may practice here without restrictions, and we hope that the Godly blessing which held sway over your dedicated efforts in your Russian homeland may be yours here as well, for we hear that you are a God-fearing people, and as such you are doubly welcome to us.

I have traveled through your villages with greatest pleasure and have seen your well-ordered houses, stables, and barns that have grown from this fruitful soil as if by magic and which offer unshakeable proof that you are well skilled in farming and place a rather high value on a comfortable home.

In the name of Canada and its people, in the name of Queen Victoria and her realm, I again offer you the hand of brotherhood and welcome you to our country and our rights and freedoms. In the eyes of our laws, the least among you is equal to the highest among us, and you will be accepted as fellow citizens among the most prominent among us.

Canada will be to you a kind and loving mother. And I hope that under her protection your community will blossom and grow in wealth and in numbers through countless generations.

In a word: under the banner now waving over us, you will find protection, peace, civil and religious freedom, and equal rights.

Such words could only fill the settlers with deepest reassurance and the greatest hopes for the future. They now went to work with double pleasure. The settlements grew as they had in Russia. Soon the land which had been made available was not nearly enough. New colonies were founded farther to the west in the bordering province of Saskatchewan, where today, at Rosthern, is found the most important Mennonite center and where in Swift Current and Hague were located the Old Colony branch churches which later migrated along to Mexico. In less that fifty years, the colonists had pressed forward as far as Alberta.

So far everything had gone well. And yet for a long time the worm had been gnawing that was eventually to become the reason for a new migration. And what was this reason? To that question there is only one answer: the school issue.

It has often been said that the question of military service was also an issue. Certainly, during the First World War the Canadian Mennonites, being of German origin and speech, did not have it easy, and it is said to have happened that one or another of them was drawn into military service. But it seems to be an established fact that this never occurred against the expressed wish of those in question.

When the Canadian Mennonites forwarded a memorandum to the Canadian government on this matter on January 18, 1917, they received an answer specifically confirming that the concessions to the Mennonites remained unchanged and that no military service would be required of them. As a matter of fact, they were given the explicit assurance that such Mennonites as had been recruited because of "ignorance or for other reasons" were to be discharged immediately if that was what they themselves wished. As far as is know, the Canadian government strictly adhered to this promise. This, of course, could not prevent that there was, nevertheless, much concern and restlessness among the Mennonites during the war. However, the migration to Mexico did not occur as a result of this concern. It took place four years after the war, and, as already stated, for only one, quite different reason, and that was the school.

CRUCIAL INTERFERENCE IN SCHOOL MATTERS

We are already acquainted with what Elder Gerhard Wiebe observed and recorded just a few years after the Mennonites arrived in Canada. Already at that time the first official attempt was made to penetrate, if with precaution, the Mennonite school system. Whereas some willingly accepted the idea of assistance from official sources for the maintenance of the schools, Elder Wiebe and those loyal to him saw in this assistance the first step to the danger of eventually seeing the schools slip out of the hands of the churches. Elder Wiebe even expressed himself bitterly against Wilhelm Hespeler who had performed important services for the Mennonites during their move to Canada and who was a proven friend of the Colonists. Apparently, he played some sort of intermediary role in these first moves by the government regarding the Old Colony schools, certainly with the firm intention of helping his friends. In short, the trouble started with the school and with the school it ended.

If the Canadian government had made a first attempt so soon to penetrate the Mennonite schools, it is easy to imagine that a point had been reached during and after World War I at which all purely German schools in the country would eventually have to go. And it came to that. Nevertheless, great consideration was still exercised in the case of the Mennonites, and so the majority of them believed, as then in Russia, that they would be able to adapt to the new situation. As far as I know, for the time being only one hour of English instruction was to be required in the daily schedule of the Old Colony schools.

But—so it was asked—would agreeing to that one hour of instruction not be synonymous with surrendering the freedom of the schools that had been pledged to them by specific documentation? Would that not be giving the little finger to the devil, who would then easily grasp the whole hand? Had Elder Wiebe not warned from the beginning against accepting any encroachment on the schools that would make them a part of the Canadian school district system, as so many had done already?

One could see the intention of the government: simply the elimination of German schools. And even if for now the government proceeded leniently and at first required only one hour of English in the daily instruction, soon it would require two, then three, and before long all teaching would have to be in English. And then their teachers would no longer be adequate and in the end, nothing would be left of their own school.

And so the member of the Reinlaender Church deliberated for a long time over what to do. They finally decided to send once again a petition to the government, beseeching it to leave everything as it was. The petition was very detailed and presented a kind of description of the Old Colony's way of life and confession of faith. In it we find a comprehensive and exceedingly interesting overview of the Old

Colony people—of their schools, their religion, their civil administration, their purpose in being, their outlook on life. The petition reads as follows:

PETITION CONCERNING THE MENNONITE SCHOOLS

We, the Mennonites who immigrated into Canada and are called the Reinlaender Church, or the Old Church, feel it our duty to render our sincerest thanks to the gracious and high Dominion government and also to the Provincial government for the truly magnanimous protection and kindness that we have received from them; and for this reason we pray to the Lord: "O Lord God, continue to be with our gracious King, the father of the land, and with all the higher and lower officials in Canada, as You have been with them heretofore in that You have guided their hearts so that we might enjoy our religious rights and the freedom to have and conduct our own schools under the protection of our esteemed government. And now give them all wise hearts and Your Holy Spirit, so that they may govern intelligently in all Canadian and British lands."

Such and similar prayers are offered to God openly every Sunday in all our meetings for the ruling authorities of the British government, under whose protection, thanks to God, we live.

We have learned that there is an intention to propose to the legislative chamber of the province of Manitoba a change in the school laws for the purpose of withdrawing from the Mennonite people in the Province the right that has been theirs since their immigration into Canada to conduct their own schools.

For this reason, it is now our wish to lay before you, the honorable members of the legislative chamber, the following facts, requesting submissively that they be taken into consideration.

It was our custom in our former country, Russia, to instruct all children in reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as religion, virtue, and cleanliness, in a manner that was essential and useful for the requirements of the rural community to which we belonged. It was one of the conditions under which we settled in Russia that we be allowed to educate our children in our own way in our own schools. And the reason for our decision to leave Russia was that this right, together with exemption from military service and the swearing of oaths, was taken from us.

While we considered leaving Russia, we were invited to send deputies to visit Canada at the expense of the Canadian government. Our delegates accepted this invitation in the year 1873 and while they were in Canada, they were given the magnanimous offer that should our people immigrate into Canada, they would be granted the privileges they desired. The delegates were informed of the terms of these privileges in a letter dated July 23,1873, which letter we consider inviolable as the founding charter of the freedoms offered to us by the Canadian government. Among other things, this letter states the following: "The unconditional right to practice their religious principles is guaranteed the Mennonites by law, without encumbrances or restrictions of any kind, and the same privilege applies to the education of their children in the schools." We believe that the government clearly understood that the matter of our schools was a concern of the greatest importance to us, for the minister of agriculture says in his report of 1873 that the "reason for the recently proposed emigration is again the issue of military service, their exemption from which the Czar is now refusing. It is also connected with the question of the schools. A new decree requires that their children be instructed in the Russian language and made subject to the

government's regulations of the schools, something which they cannot bring into harmony with their conscience."

This was a correct statement regarding our reasons for leaving Russia. And the minister further states in his report, noting the terms of the agreement, that "The contractual commitments to these people, as given in the letter to the Mennonite delegates, dated July 23, 1873, are as follows:

1. …
2. …
3. The privilege of their own religious schools

The privileges granted us by the Canadian government were our sole reason for our migration to Canada. And since we believed then, as we do even now, that the word of the government is inviolable, since government is instituted by God, we built our own schools right from the beginning, even though doing so caused us numerous difficulties. And we have continued since to build and maintain our own schools in good faith and without requesting assistance.

Our children are trained in our schools in the three main branches of learning: in reading, writing and arithmetic. They are trained well, so that they are able to read with understanding, and they are acquainted with religious as well as secular writings; they are taught to write legibly and articulately, as well as to figure, so that they can take care of their own business records and keep their own books correctly. In short, they receive in our schools the very training which is required of them in the rural life we lead.

We have altogether twenty-two schools. The schoolhouses are roomy, well ventilated and lighted and are warm and comfortable. Living rooms or houses for the teachers are connected with them. They are all so close together that they are easily reached by the pupils. The teachers are all adequately trained persons of character. The schools are open for approximately seven months during the year. The children of school age, seven to thirteen for the girls and seven to fourteen for the boys, attend as regularly as possible, many of them beginning before they are seven and some even after they have reached the age of thirteen or fourteen. The clergy undertakes the responsibility of urging parents to send their children to school regularly and sees to it that the schools are conducted effectively. And we really believe that all our children, except for such as are deficient or ill, follow the instruction and become educated. Our community life prescribes that all parents must see to the training of their children. There are no illiterates among our people.

We do not want to tire you with an explication of our way of thinking, but we would like to make clear to you the principles on which our schools are based. Although we are usually called the Reinland Mennonite Church, we are a community that is bound together not only in religious matters, but also in worldly affairs, and it is our belief that we are to apply the commands of the Holy Scriptures in our everyday lives, as well as in matters of religion, that is, in worldly as well as in spiritual affairs. This is why we feel constrained to obey the command of the Word of God not to harbor a spirit of conflict in our hearts; that our words are to be <u>yes</u> or <u>no</u> and that we are not to go before a court of law, but are to give also our cloak to him who takes our coat.

While our children are in school, the duty is laid on our conscience to teach them both religious and worldly truths as parts of a whole, so that they may be devout, good and faithful, as well as industrious, selfless, and co-operative in all their relationships with God and their fellow human beings. Thus, we attempt to equip our children for their duties to God and man and for their place and their work in the world. We are an agricultural people; we live on the land and till the soil; and our schools are designed to equip our children to be good rural citizens, progressive, industrious, simple, given to hospitality, to a spirit of co-operation and good works toward all.

We hesitate to talk about the accomplishments of our school system, lest we appear to boast; but with your kind permission, we must talk about them, as if it were in confidence, so that you may know the whole truth. We will not touch upon the intimate, religious side of our community life, because we assume that you do not wish for us to talk about it, since that is fundamentally a matter of a personal relationship to God, even if it is linked to the other relationships of life, which is open to the world.

Nevertheless, we allow ourselves to mention the following results that accrue from the educational offerings our community schools have in common:

(a) Our children are taught fidelity and obedience to the king and his government as instituted by God, and we assure you that our people are deeply faithful to the governments of this country, in which we have enjoyed such a great freedom of conscience.

(b) Our children are taught to live a rural life, a life in nature, on the farm; and their souls and bodies, their habits and activities are all centered on this rural life. The result is that our people continue generation after generation to live a simple life on the farm, without any intentions of moving to towns and cities. They are taught to be content on the land, and we can truthfully say that they are.

(c) Our children are taught to live a life of co-operation, to hold together and to help each other and their neighbors as well in all obligations and relationships of life. And we want humbly to submit to you that they carry this teaching over into reality. We work together in the ordinary activities and efforts of life. We help one another in that we further the material well-being of the individual, lending support to all who desire it, who want to achieve independence and to farm on their own. We work together to initiate thrift and have our own savings and trust system, our Waisenamt, our trustees who receive monies from our people and lend it out to them for productive purposes, paying five percent interest to lenders and charging six percent from borrowers. Our only security is the honor of the borrowers and their guarantee; and we are pleased to be able to inform you that we suffer no losses.

    In all economic matters of life, our children are taught to be simple, industrious, and unselfish, and we take the liberty to tell you that with but few exceptions, they manifest these traits in their lives.

(d) We provide for our own poor, for the sick, the weak, the feeble minded, whoever or whatever they may be, and we would not wish to tolerate knowingly that anyone of our people should be dependent on the charity of others. We believe that we have cost the government little or nothing in matters concerning law enforcement, the courts, hospitals or prisons.

(e) We live in peace with our neighbors who are not Mennonites. We respect them and think highly of them, and if their behavior is a truthful indication of their hearts, they do not look upon us with disfavor, for they are generally friendly to us.

(f) Through God's grace, as a consequence of the privileges that have been granted us through the government, we have been permitted since we established ourselves in Manitoba to have our own schools, according to the agreement between the Canadian government and our delegates and have carried over into reality the interrelated community teachings of these schools. Meanwhile our material well-being has prospered abundantly, and we were always—and still are—ready, willing, and most eager to carry our full share and more of the tax burdens needed to maintain the country and the government; and with respect to this, we beg leave to be permitted to say that during the war, we made an effort to contribute substantially and voluntarily to every national cause in order to render our thanks for the freedom of conscience which has been accorded us. Them before God and man.

After the statements made above, it could seem that we think highly of ourselves and that regarding our accomplishments, we are, in fact, singing our own praises. However, we don't want to awaken such an impression, because we know our own faults and humbly acknowledge them before God and man.

We ask that you not take our statements about ourselves and our school system as the basis for your opinion. We would ask, rather, that you conduct most considerately an independent, unprejudiced investigation into the social, economic, and moral conditions of our community and then form your opinion of us and our school system on the basis of the facts you will discover. With regard to this, we have only one request: that you be so kind as not to examine the particulars of our school system, its mechanism, we might say, and then, because it deviates to certain extent from that of the state schools, condemn it without first taking into account the results which our system achieves.

We would like to request respectfully that before any of the privileges which we received under the agreement of 1873 are disputed, a complete, just and unprejudiced study of our school system be undertaken, as it is revealed in the life of our people.

We submit to you with greatest respect that the agreement made with our delegates has been of great blessing and benefit to us, and through us to the country as a whole, and that it has not been in any respect a detriment to the country or to any group of people in this country. And we would further like to lay before you respectfully that both parties are bound by honor and duty to abide with the terms of that agreement, as they have abided with them until now.

We assume that the people of the province of Manitoba will honor and fulfill the commitment which the Dominion government has made to us and that we will be able to continue and enjoy the freedom to go on doing as we have done until now, for which we are thankful to you in advance.

Accompanying is a copy of a reply to a report of the chamber of deputies, with copies of documents relating to the conference between the minister of agriculture and the Mennonite representatives in July of 1873.

We permit ourselves to conclude with an expression of submission on the part of our people to the government and our sincere decision to remain submissive and faithful also in the future, as we have been in the past.

May God bless the government for its kindness and goodness!

To the honorable members of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba

February 1919 For the Reinlaender Mennonite Church

(signed) Johann J Friesen, Bishop
(signed) Franz F. Froese, Administrator

The answer of the government to this petition of the Reinlaender Church was negative. With this, the matter was decided. The decision was made to emigrate.

„Am Brunnen vor dem Tore…", das Titelbild zu dem ursprünglichen Buche „Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott".

Foto: F. W. Butterlin

2. To Mexico

WHERE TO GO?

The decision to emigrate had indeed been made, but for the time being nothing was done about it. Where were they to go? The question was not so easy to answer now as it had been fifty years before, when the New World, America, had beckoned the Russian Mennonites with tempting promises; when the British government had openly competed for them, and Canada had finally opened its doors to its far-spread virgin lands with a glowing promise of privileges. Today no one competed for them.

Whoever believes that the various invitations that the Mennonites did receive with time from a number of North American states and also from other places were to be compared with the invitation of Czarina Catherine II to migrate to Russia or with that of the British consul in Berdjansk to settle in Canada is mistaken. The offers that were made to the Reinlaender can be valued only from a business point of view. The people who is this respect did compete for the Mennonites, so eager to emigrate, were interested only in making a shrewd business deal. For this reason, caution was doubly in order, and the choice of a new place to settle became more difficult.

Closest, of course, were the United States of North America, the colossus which still stretched with an inexhaustible wealth of land from the Great Lakes in the north to the Rio Grande in the south, the country in which thousands and more thousands of Mennonites had already found a home. In large numbers they had long since settled in such states as Pennsylvania and Kansas, then in Oklahoma, California, and Texas, and in smaller groups in other states as well. Twice the Reinlaender Mennonites were almost to the point of moving into the USA.

The first time it was the state of Mississippi that was taken into consideration on the basis of an offer of land. The down payment for almost 200,000 acres had already been raised, but then something interfered with closing the deal. Harder reports that the border of the United States was suddenly and for some unknown reason temporarily closed to the Mennonites, so that the delegates were unable to travel and conclude the purchase.

As became clear later, the assurances on the part of the state of Mississippi with regard to privileges stood on a very weak footing, so that Harder writes with reference to the closing of the border: “We had to view it as the providence of God, who did not want to allow us to move into misfortune. Very likely the entire offer of freedoms was only an expedient of eager land agents.”

Such may well have been the case, for it is hard to imagine that an individual state of the USA could have offered on its own authority and without the consent of the federal government privileges of such a fundamental nature as the Mennonites requested.

It was much the same later in the case of a land deal planned in Minnesota. In this case things went so far that legal proceedings were taken against J. F. Wiebe, who had negotiated a purchase of 300,000 acres of land, when a land agent from Minneapolis demanded $60,000 in damages because the deal had fallen through. Among other projects that came up as time went on there was also an offer from Florida.

Even in Canada itself an opportunity seemed once more to offer itself. Harder reports on this as follows:

> Now it happened that the government of the province of Quebec seemed to be in favor of granting us the freedoms we were seeking. Following up on this, a number of delegates from Manitoba and Swift Current went there, leaving on August 13, 1920, and returning at the end of the month. A number of additional trips were made to Quebec, and it seemed that the government there was actually in favor of taking us. But since Quebec is just as much a part of Canada as are Manitoba and Saskatchewan, we decided among ourselves not to take a chance on moving there unless the Dominion government gave its approval; and since this approval could not be achieved, even though both Elder Johann Friesen of Manitoba and Elder Abraham Wiebe from Swift Current had gone to Ottawa to see about it, the Quebec project was also abandoned.

No, in Canada every further attempt was useless, since no province, no matter how isolated or far away in the cold north it might be, could bypass the regulations of the Dominion government. And by now there were ever sharper proceedings against the Mennonites because of their opposition to the public schools. They had to pay money fines repeatedly and it even got to a point at which one of their preachers was imprisoned for refusing to send his children to public school. The only thing left to consider was some foreign country, as far away as possible, where they would be able to begin once more in the way that their ancestors had begun a hundred and fifty years before in Russia and fifty years ago in Canada. But where was such a country to be found?

SCOUTS TRAVEL TO SOUTH AMERICA

South America! Yes, that was where such a country must be. Among the twenty-one Latin-American countries there certainly would be found one that would welcome the Mennonites and offer them a new home. The narrower choice fell on the two largest countries, already long known as areas of settlement for Europeans, namely, Brazil and Argentina, the former larger in area that even the United States.

It was decided to send deputies to these countries to examine the possibilities of purchasing land and to request the indispensable privileges, and if possible to select immediately a place in which to settle. To undertake this responsibility, a delegation of six men was elected by the three main Old Colony churches interested in emigrating. Manitoba sent Klaas Heide and Cornelius Rempel; the Hague church was represented by two preachers, Johann P. Wall and Johann Wall; from Swift Current came the preacher Julius Wiebe, accompanied by David Rempel. Let us mention once more that the Swift Current and Hague churches were located in the province of Saskatchewan and were affiliated with the Reinlaender Church in Manitoba.

These six delegates began their long, fateful journey to South America early in August of 1919, from which they did not return until November 24 of that year; and when they did come back, they did so without success.

One of the delegates, David Rempel, described the entire trip in a diary and in letters to his wife and family. This record has fortunately been preserved. The journey took the delegates through Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. Nowhere was it possible to come to an agreement with any government on anything positive concerning the desired privileges. Of the six delegates, only five returned. While they were underway, preacher Johann Wall from Neuanlage suddenly fell ill in Curitiba, Brazil. He died after a short illness and was buried there, in a foreign land, far from his home and family – one who had fallen by the way, whom comrades had to leave behind with heavy hearts and now with the shadow of death over their mission.

PARAGUAY?

From only one country did they bring back a glimmer of hope, from Paraguay. This country, without a coast, locked in between Brazil on the one side and Argentina and Bolivia on the other, was not disinclined to accept strong groups of settlers in order to locate them principally in the hot, long-contested area of the Gran Chaco, which some twelve years later became the reason for a war with Bolivia. With the exception of the Hague Church, the Old Colonists could not warm up to the idea of migrating to Paraguay and dropped the idea. The people from Hague, however, made another attempt and once more sent delegates there. But they returned without accomplishing anything, and so the churches belonging to the Reinlaender constituency finally abandoned the project completely.

Not so the Sommerfelder Church, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, was one of the independent groups of Mennonites that had originated in Canada. According to Dr. Walter Quiring, one of the best known authorities in all areas of Mennonitism, the Sommerfelder and other Chortitza groups from Manitoba also sent delegates to Paraguay, again six of them, in February of 1921, and they found the prospects in the Gran Chaco to be good. But economic circumstances prevented an emigration for some years, and it did not become a reality until 1926-27, at which time approximately three hundred families, consisting of some two thousand souls, moved to Paraguay. After endless difficulties, loss of time, infectious diseases, great loss of life, and other problems, they established the Menno colony in the Chaco. Today this colony is a neighbor of the larger Fernheim colony, established by Mennonites who fled from Russia and arrived in Paraguay by way of Germany.

TO THE LAND OF THE ETERNAL SUN

For our Old Colonists, however, Paraguay was no longer in question. But meanwhile, a new star of hope had risen: Mexico. On September 8, 1920, while the unsuccessful negotiations with the provincial government of Quebec were still proceeding, a group from Hague had sent a number of delegates to Mexico to ascertain what, if anything, could be done in this revolution-torn, often defamed, and largely mythical “land of the eternal sun.” The delegates returned after a month with good news.

David Harder recounts that a decision was made at a brotherhood meeting to send a new delegation to Mexico, one that would represent all three groups, in order to establish firmer connections there. When the delegates from Manitoba ran into difficulties with their passports, the deputies from Hague and Swift Current left without them. In December they came back with such encouraging news that all other emigration projects were dropped and full attention was focused on Mexico.

The problem of emigration now began to take a more concrete form. Again, a brotherhood meeting was called, and the connections which had been established with the Mexican government and a land agent named Arturo J. Braniff were discussed. Braniff was represented in Canada by a Mennonite, J. F. Wiebe, who later assisted with the final land purchase, but without Braniff.

A new commission was elected to initiate the necessary procedures and to take the Mexican project definitively in hand. The group from Manitoba was represented by Klaas Heide, Cornelius Rempel, and preacher Julius Loewen; the Hague group chose preacher Johann Loeppky and Benjamin Goertzen; Swift current provided David Rempel, already known to us as a chronicler. He again kept a diary during this, the first of the more extensive trips to Mexico, and I now let him speak in excerpts from his writings about his impressions and experiences connected with this mission of the deputies to Mexico.

January 21, 1921…At 1:30 p.m. again to Rosenfeld. Met my comrades there on the train. Shortly before five we arrived in Winnipeg and went to the Mano Hotel.

January 25 We have straightened out our passports, which is a rather tiresome affair with the US immigration authorities. By noon we were finished with this. We then had the passports stamped by the Mexican consul, which costs $5.00, and then bought tickets to El Paso.

January 28 Arrived in El Paso at 1 p.m. Checked in at the Star Hotel.

January 30 Around 5 p.m., J. F. Wiebe came to the hotel with the Mexican interpreter and brought us the message from the president and the minister of agriculture that we are welcome…He said that the government knows we are desirable people and that they want to grant us every protection and complete freedom. In the evening, J. F. Wiebe came with a telegram in which a certain Mr. Enlow, who has land on hand in northwest Mexico, informs us that he expects to see us in Tucson, Arizona.

February 2 Tucson Enlow arrived on the train from Los Angeles around 2 o'clock... We then drove to Nogales… Here we crossed the border and our passports were stamped again, and from there we went to our quarters.

February 3 The train left Nogales at 7 a.m. We went between hills across very level valleys. In spite of the aridity, the land seems to be good. Where there is irrigation, we came upon numerous orange groves and other fruit-laden trees. Mr. Enlow offered us 120,000 acres of land at sixty to seventy-five cents an acre at Hermosillo (in Sonora). Here sacks with gold were loaded openly and almost unguarded into the passenger compartments. There were about ten sacks in our compartment, about as big as a twenty-pound sugar sack. In the evening we arrived in the harbor city of Guaymas.

February 4 From Guaymas to Culiacan, Sinaloa

February 5 …Around nine o'clock the six of us left Culiacan with J. F. Wiebe, D. Salas Lopez, Enslow, and a guide to take a look at the countryside. The land is level and overgrown with high shrubbery, which is so thick that at fifty meters it is hardly possible to see the grazing cattle. Different

kinds of cacti grow there, some so large that a single cactus tree would make a whole wagon load. Others look almost like a snake… The land is hard and dry, and it doesn't look as if anything could be successfully grown there…. Later we drove farther north to where an irrigation system has been installed. Here things grow splendidly, sugar cane and bananas… By 6 p.m. we were back in the city. In the evening, there was a lot of commotion, fireworks and performances far into the night.

February 6 Slept well last night. The weather was not too hot, but really rather pleasant with a breeze. There was a lot of commotion again today. Many disguised figures walk and ride through the streets. They wear all kinds of masks with horns and other things. Also, they have fitted out vehicles to look like ships and there are many fireworks and loud cracking noises as if war has broken out. They call it a carnival. Some go to church; others disguise themselves as the devil. One feels rather strange here. J. F. Wiebe said he was homesick…We were invited by a club to a masked ball for nine o'clock tonight, where there will be performances and dancing; we declined to go, however.

February 7 Looked at more land, east of here…. Not suited for settlement by us… Arrived at the hotel in the afternoon. There were still performances and dancing, but this soon stopped. However, we heard a lot of explosions from fireworks at the hotel, and this is still continuing.

February 8 At 6 a.m. we left Culiacan for Mazatlan. Since the carnival was in process here too, there were again a lot of masked figures and much hooting and yelling.

February 9 Took a walk at the harbor

February 10 In the morning we went from Mazatlan through fertile fields to Ciudad Ruiz. Ate supper in our hotel. The hotel has a straw roof; the walls are out of rough boards, otherwise everything is open… Fresh air is free; a meal costs 50 cents as does sleeping on a board frame without a blanket. B. Goertzen, Klaas Heide, and I preferred to sleep in a railway car. Games and dancing went on all night again. Apparently, the carnival is still continuing.

February 11 If one digs a hole in the ground, the earth is warm and gives off a vapor. The water from the wells is almost lukewarm. Here in Mexico, many still ride donkeys, and also transport goods on them, as we read in the Holy Scriptures about ancient times. Even firewood and boards are hauled on donkeys… In Rosario, I went to get some hot water from a restaurant. A large hog lay in the room, feeding on corn…From Ruiz, we went by car to Tuxpan. Were greatly honored here as guests of a landholding company. Drove from there to Santiago to a Rancho named Chilpa, where Enlow offered us 300,000 acres of land at $15 per acre. Here everything grows without irrigation – tobacco, corn, beans, and other vegetables. Enlow also offered us 160,000 acres in another area, but we didn't look at it; parts of it are said to be hilly.

February 12 At eight o'clock, D. Salas Lopez, Klaas Heide, C. Rempel, and B. Goertzen left for Tepic. The rest of us were supposed to leave a half hour later in another car. But it hasn't arrived yet, and it is twelve o'clock already. Our trip is slow… The women here stand almost to their knees in water as they do their washing. They use stones for washboards… The climate is said to be very unhealthful here… Finally, at one o'clock we got underway and drove until eight in the evening to Tepic. It was a bad trip.

February 13 Left Tepic at 5:30 a.m…. Quite steep hills up and down. Also passed close to a fire-spitting mountain…At one time it threw out ashes and rocks for miles around. We arrived in Ixtlan

at 4 p.m. Intend to go on today, riding donkeys, so that if possible, we may arrive by twelve noon tomorrow at San Marcos to get a train from there to Mexico City. We left Ixtlan at 7 p.m. on the donkeys. We rented seven of the animals for 110,000 pesos. After riding for three hours, we were able to see the lights of Ixtlan far below us. We went higher and higher. There would be a brief let-up in the climb now and then, and then it was up again. At eleven o'clock the moon went down, and it became quite dark. We reached the top of the mountain at midnight. Here brother C. Rempel wanted to take a rest. He said that he was unable to go on. So, I and Ohm Julius Loewen and the guide stayed behind with him. The guide said that an hour farther was a rancho. The others wanted to get there to rest and feed the animals.

After brother Rempel had rested for a while, we started after the others. After we had ridden down the hill for several hours and in the meanwhile caught up with the others, there was still no rancho to be seen, and brother Rempel was tired again and lay down for a while. I stayed with him and held his donkey. By now, we could see lights. After a while we rode on, and when we finally arrived at the rancho below, day was breaking. It was almost five o'clock. For almost ten hours we had ridden without nourishment, at night and in darkness over very rough ground. One after the other of us lay down. Brother Cornelius Rempel lay down in a bed. We asked the woman in charge of the place to heat some water for us and made our coffee.

After we had eaten, I woke up brother C. Rempel. He got up and ate and had recuperated enough that we were all able to go on together at 7 a.m. We were told that it was still three hours to San Marcos…Now, in daylight, we could see how rugged the way was and what dangerous chasms and steep precipices we had passed in the darkness. In some places there was only a narrow path, with a deep abyss falling away on the side. Mr. Salas Lopez sent a messenger ahead to hold the train for us. Otherwise, we would have arrived too late. Instead of getting to San Marcos in three hours, we arrived there just before twelve noon. When we reached the station, B. Goertzen and Ohm Julius Loewen were missing, and the train was waiting to leave. Because of a misunderstanding, they had not found the station. But they finally came, and we immediately boarded the train. We were all so tired that we felt no hunger, and after the train got underway, we slept a little. At 4:30 p.m. we got off at Guadalajara…

February 15 Slept well and got a good rest after we had a bath last night and a good meal. Our bones still ache a little… This morning we went to the market. All the vegetables there are nice and fresh. We also visited a beer brewery, whose German owner treated us to some beer… The prices in the shops here seem cheap to us, cotton ten to eleven cents per meter, which is 39 ¾ inches.

February 16 Arrived in Mexico City at 9:30 in the morning…

February 17 In the afternoon, a Mr. Wulff took us to look at a part of the city. We were invited to a meeting with the president of Mexico in his palace at 8:30 p.m. But first we went at 7:30 to the Hotel Imperial, where the minister of Agriculture lives at present. From there we went to the palace with the minister and Arturo Braniff, a brother-in-law of the president. Here the president received us. After Ohm Julius Loewen had handed over to him our petition for privileges, each article was separately discussed. The article concerning marriage and the one about the Waisenamt were satisfactorily settled. The president expressed the wish to become acquainted with our regulations on orphans, which we promised to send him in writing.

The schools, too, were discussed. He said that we could have for now our own schools and our own language, but that it would later be advantageous to learn the Spanish language too. But after our past experiences and our reasons as to why we didn't want to do so were explained to him, he expressed himself as being quite satisfied that we had such a firm reason. D. Salas Lopez had also heard him say that of such people he would like to have many in his country. And so, he promised ever to burden or hinder us in this respect.

Finally, after a conversation of one and one-half hours, Ohm J. Loeppky said to him in tears that he, the president and his ministers, would receive in eternity their reward for their friendly reception of us and the freedoms granted to us; that Mexico was to be for us the promised land, in which we would find a better reception than in other places. After that we took our leave with warm handshakes. As we were about to go, an attendant appeared and invited us to have a look at some things of interest. Since the palace is on a high hill, we could see the city from above, which was only half lighted, since there was not sufficient water to drive the electricity machines. The attendant invited us to come back the next morning at eleven o'clock, and then we would be shown the place in daylight.

February 18 At ten-thirty in the morning we took the streetcar back to the president's palace. We were well received there, and an attendant conducted us through all the chambers and explained everything. What a splendid, costly display! Tabletops made out of onyx! Also went up to the third floor and through all the bedrooms of the president, of his wife, and his daughter. There, on the third floor, is a small flower garden in which there are supposed to be over a hundred different kinds of flowers and roses… At five o'clock we spoke with Arturo J. Braniff. He is a land broker who has much land on hand. He has called our attention to a number of places which are supposed to be suitable for us, costing from $5.00 to $14.00 per acre, and which we want to look at.

February 19 We were to come to Braniff at 5 p.m. The agreement concerning the privileges was supposed to be ready then, but we had to go back to our hotel disappointed. The statement of the agreement was not satisfactory.

So much for the personal notes of David Rempel. Until March 13, the day the commission returned to Swift Current he faithfully kept his diary.

Numerous pages are devoted to the days of February 20 to 27, during which time the commission was detained in the capital, working daily on the matter of the privileges, negotiating, amending, above all, waiting and waiting. Finally, the delegates decided to look at various land projects in the meanwhile and traveled to Durango. In the course of the eventual migration to Mexico, a settlement was later founded on one of the tracts of land which they had inspected at this time.

After a great many experiences and adventures, the delegates finally returned on March 12-13. Even though no firm land deal had been completed as yet, they nevertheless returned with a valuable document that made the emigration out of Canada and the move to Mexico possible: the privileges, which had been approved and signed on February 25, 1921, by President-General Alvaro Obregon and countersigned by A. I. Villareal, at that time minister of farming and agriculture.

The privileges read as follows:

Concessions to the Reinlaender Mennonite Old Colony from Canada, granted through the constitutional President of the Mexican government, General Alvaro Obregon, for the purpose of settling in our country as agricultural colonists.

To the representatives of the Old Colony of the Reinlaender Mennonite Church Julius Loewen, Johann Loeppky, Benjamin Goertzen, Cornelius Rempel, Klaas Heide, and David Rempel.

In reply to your petition of January 29 of this year, in which you express the wish to settle in our country as agricultural colonists, I have the honor of informing you of the following concerning your individual concrete requests:

1. You will not be obligated to render military service
2. Under no circumstances will you be required to swear an oath.
3. You have the far-reaching right to practice your religious principles and to live according to the rules of your church without being molested or restricted in any form.
4. You have full permission to found your own schools with your own teachers without being hindered by the government in any way.
5. As concerns the following point, our laws are exceedingly liberal. You may exercise self-determination concerning your possessions in whatever form that you consider suitable, and this government will not raise any kind of objection to the organization by members of your sect of an economic self-administration that is according to your wishes.

It is the most emphatic wish of this government to further colonization by people who are possessed of orderliness, morality, and willingness to work, as is the case with the Mennonites; for this reason they will be welcomed with pleasure if the preceding pronouncements are satisfactory. At the same time, it is confirmed that the granted freedoms are guaranteed through our laws and that you will enjoy them with certainty forever.

Sufragio Efectivo, No. Reeleccion
Mexico, February 25, 1921
The Constitutional President of the United Mexican States
Signed: A. Obregon
The Minister of Agriculture
Signed: A. I. Villareal

The door of Mexico was open!

It was my full intention in the foregoing to let the diary of our friend Rempel do the speaking. With his notations he leaves his descendants and the Colony a gift which will be fully appreciated only in the future, when the settlement in Mexico will be spoken of as we, in looking back, speak today about the Mennonite epochs in Russia and Canada. The same is true as well for the account of teacher Harder, from which we have quoted a number of times.

The straightforward notes of David Rempel, excerpts of which I have presented with only minor corrections, gave us the Mennonites' first direct and apprehensive insight into the legendary land south

of the Rio Grande, a land of which the Colonists knew next to nothing and which was now to become their new home.

Should I describe in detail what happened now: how projects were examined and rejected; of the dealings with agents, with lawyers, and with government authorities; and how it happened finally that the vast Hacienda Bustillos in the state of Chihuahua was chosen as the land on which to settle?

To do so would produce too much of the good and would by far exceed the scope of this chapter. Let us leave the various letters and documents about these things in their archives and satisfy ourselves with several brief observations. Harder makes the following comments:

> After a number of trips to Mexico, the delegates brought back the news on September 10, 1921, that they had bought approximately 100,000 hectares, or almost 230,000 acres of land in the state of Chihuahua, at San Antonio de los Arenales for the price of $8.25 per acre. Now everyone was asked to announce how many acres he wished to buy there and to come up immediately with a down payment of $2.50 for every acre he applied for.

The delegates were convinced that finally after much searching they had found the right place when they came to the giant land complex that was offered to them at the Hacienda Bustillos by the Zuloage family, which owned large landed estates. Instrumental in bringing about the purchase were the agents Charles Newman, from El Paso, Texas, and J. F. Wiebe from Herbert, Saskatchewan, who worked with Newman and who has already been mentioned a number of times. On the part of the delegates, as is evident from the relevant documents, the main task in closing the deal fell little by little to Klaas Heide, who, through his intelligence, his willingness to take on responsibility, and his ability to make decisions may well have determined the outcome of these events.

The acquired land stretched from the San Antonio station and the Northwest Railroad to the north and northeast, but also reached with a substantial tip to the south, beyond San Antonio, in the direction of the mining town of Cusihuiriachic. For many years, this tip – we might mention in passing – contained only one Mennonite village, Kleefeld. Only later were new villages founded here as the first overflow from heavily settled areas.

In order to satisfy legal and official requirements, the Manitoba settlers established two trading companies, which functioned officially as the purchasers of the land and divided it in parcels among individual settlers, One of the companies was registered under the name “Heide-Neufeld and the Reinlaender Waisenamt,” the other as the “Rempel-Wall and Reinlaender Waisenamt.”

The Saskatchewan group did it a bit differently and appointed two men for each village to buy the land in their names. In principle it was the same procedure as that of the Manitoba groups. The two companies and the representatives of the Saskatchewan villages now concluded the purchasing agreements.

For those who are interested in exact figures, let it be said that the Manitoba groups acquired 62,728 hectares of land and the Saskatchewan group 29,998. All in all, we can let the matter rest with a simpler round figure of 100,000 hectares.

The division of the land and its distribution among individual Colonists, as well as establishment of the villages, went according to the Colonists’ location in Canada. The huge land complex was

divided into two parts, one the so-called Manitoba Plan, stretching generally from San Antonio to Rubio, and the other, the Swift Current Plan, which encompasses the smaller, remaining part of the complex that bends toward the northwest. Logically this complex should have been named Saskatchewan, since this was the second largest province in which the Colonists had settled in Canada. But the settlers decided to use, instead of the name of their former province, the name of what was for most of them their more immediate home in Canada, namely, the town of Swift Current. Each group brought its own elders and other leaders, but together the two groups were one: our Old Colony.

We cannot look back to that time when the Old Colony established itself in Mexico, beset by many different technical problems without admiring their excellent organization with which the task was undertaken and completed and so appropriately conceived that the entire organization of the Colony has preserved itself to this day without a single fundamental change, and that even now there is no reason to carp at or alter anything as it exists in its established form.

Winding up their affairs and liquating their property in what had been their home in Canada proceeded less smoothly. David Harder reports on considerable difficulties in the sale of their properties, on differences of opinion, noncompliance, conflict, and impatience, as well as on serious mistakes and injustices which crept in as affairs were wound up. But as time went on such problems became submerged before the tremendous new project that was now being undertaken. The difficulties have lost in importance and meaning as time goes on, except that we are reminded – as Harder says – that "the devil, who is a persecutor and adversary of all that is good, has his finger in every pie, and so also here." But Luther says:

der Fuerst dieser Welt wie saur er sich stellt	How churlish the prince of this world appears;
Tut er uns doch nichts: das macht er ist gericht!	But he does us no harm because he is condemned!
Ein Woertlein kann ihn faellen!	One little word can fell him!

No, the devil did no harm to them, to our Old Colonists. He was, of course, able to spend his rage and instigate his work of discontent, to confuse many and to burden the hearts of others, but in the end he could not halt the move, could not destroy the enterprise which the Power for Good had intended and planned, and on which a higher blessing was obviously ordained.

After Harder's description of all these difficulties, we find in his account this laconic and historically and ethnically dramatic note:

> On Wednesday, March 1, 1922, the first train of emigrants left Plum Coulee, Manitoba. On March 2 the second train left from Haskett, Manitoba. The third train left on March 7, the fourth on March 11; both from Haskett. During this time two trains also departed from the colony at Swift Current in Saskatchewan. They all arrived safely and in good condition at San Antonio in Mexico during the first half of the month of March; there they were unloaded and all goods were transported onto the land on which each Colonist intended to settle.

Before I begin with a description of further developments on Mexican soil, let me mention that the Colony did not go in its entirety as one single and complete unit to San Antonio. We have already noted that usable land had also been found in Durango, on which a smaller part of the Colony settled, also with the same documented privileges given the larger group. In what follows, we will deal primarily with the larger settlement, the one at San Antonio.

Later several other groups of Mennonites came to Mexico; there were the refugees from Russia, of whom some thirty-five to forty families came into the country in 1924. They did not succeed, however, in establishing their own settlement. Nor did they enjoy the privileges which had been granted the Old Colony.

A more typical group consisting of Sommerfelders definitely fared better. Like the Old Colonists, they also had been given the presidential privileges. Very wisely they stayed close to the large settlement of the Old Colony instead of moving as an individual group to a more distant area. In close proximity to the Old Colony they founded a row of villages in Santa Clara, which continued, despite unfavorable soil and weather conditions, to emulate those of the Old Colony and to contribute their fair share in helping the entire undertaking of the Mennonite settlement in Mexico to achieve a broader base, greater security, and – not of least importance – a good name and reputation.

Pushed in between the settlement of the Old Colony and that of Santa Clara, we find a small group of settlers from Halbstadt, also Sommerfelders, and – mentioned here only for the sake of completeness – the tiny settlement established nearby by a few families from Kansas, which, however, has since become blended with the Old Colony.

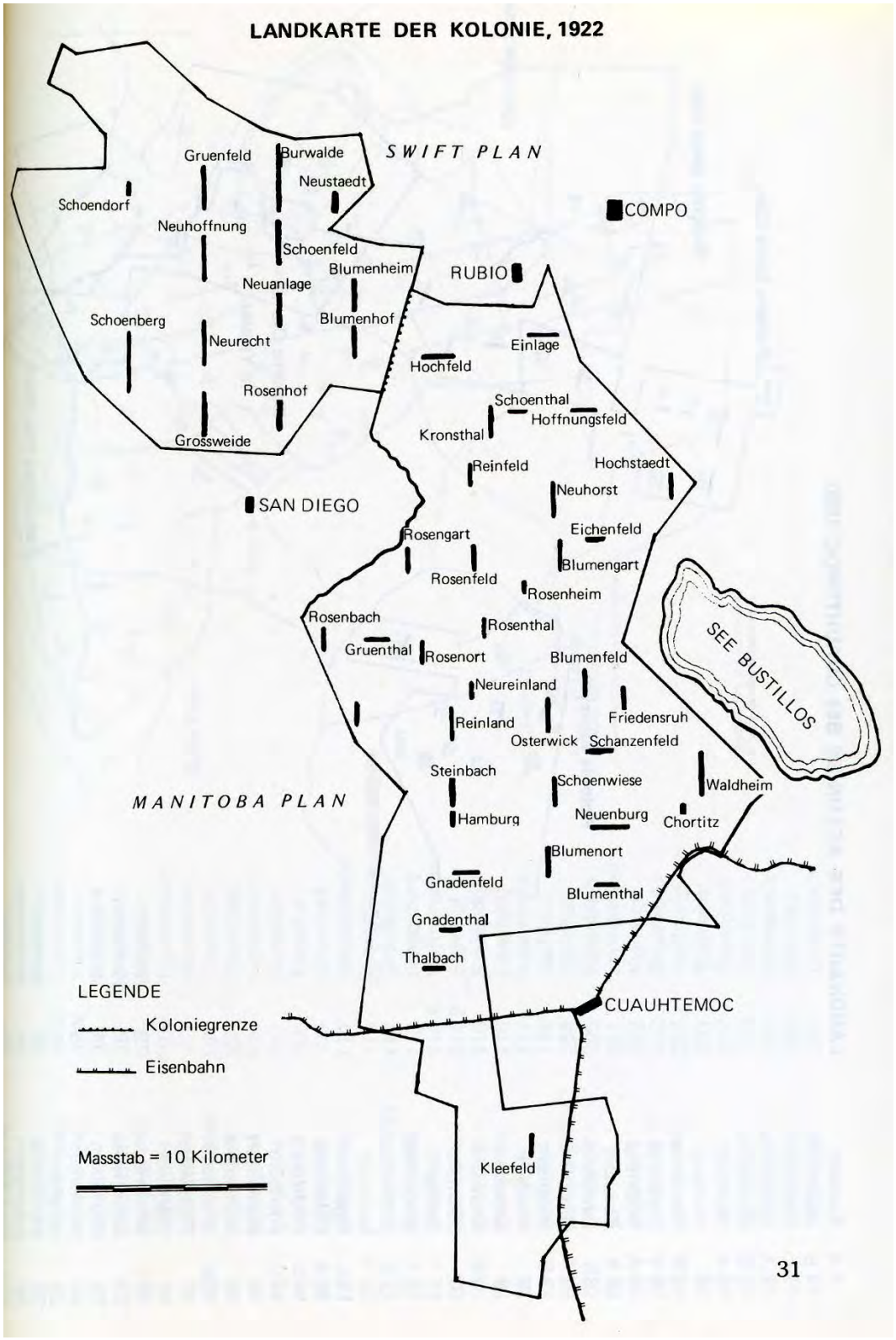
In later years, the so-called Holdeman people established a mission headquarters here, from where they have made it their duty to conduct a Christian mission among the native population. We might mention that the Old Colony itself, which fundamentally does not become involved in the affairs of others and respects everyone's belief, declines to engage in mission activity outside its own group.

In February of 1948, a new group, consisting at the time of 150 families of the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites (Quellenkolonie) contracted to buy approximately 22,000 hectares of land on the estate of Las Jaqueyes, in the vicinity of Santa Clara. This, at first a small but very vigorous and progressive ethnic group, has since experienced excellent development.

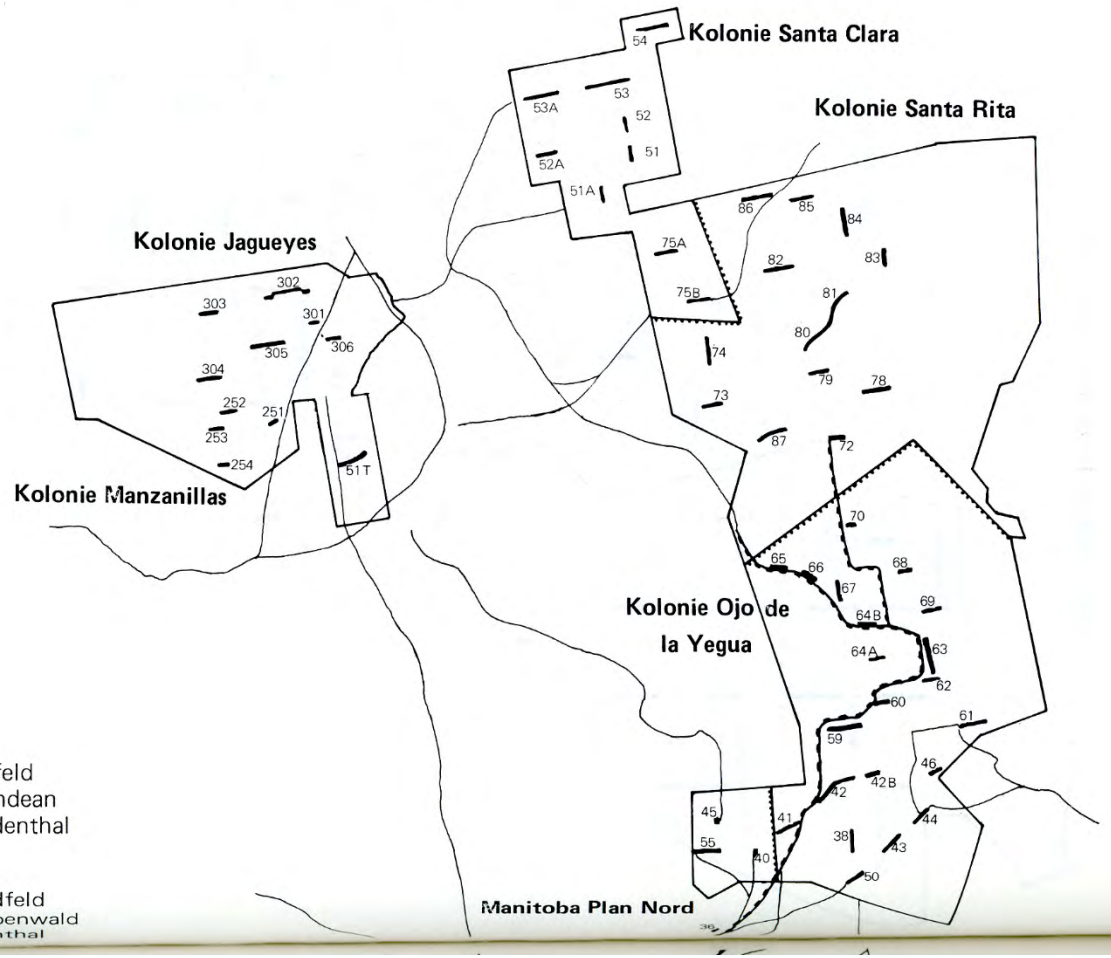
A perusal of the two maps presented on pages 45 and 46 shows clearly how the original settlement has grown and extended itself between the years 1922 to 1980. At the beginning there were only the two complexes of Manitoba and Swift Current. Then came (far up in the northern portion of the newer map) the Santa Clara colony of the Sommerfelders. The Bergthalers and the Halbstaedters were originally located between the Manitoba and the Swift Current areas but are now situated side by side with the North Colony. This new colony, better known by the old name of the landed estate, Ojo de la Yegua, is a daughter colony of the Old Colony and came into being in 1945. Adjacent to it, to the north toward Santa Clara, is the settlement area of Santa Rita. And finally, toward the west, is the former land of the Hacienda Los Jagueyes, on which the Quellenkolonie (Kleine Gemeinde) has settled.

The approximately 6000 souls with whom the Colony began at one time has by today – even though there are always some who leave – grown into a population of 50,000 or more (exact figures at the moment, in 1980, are not available), who live in at least 120 villages. So much in sum total for the

geographic and demographic aspects of the settlement that was founded by the Old Colony Mennonites in the area of Cuautemoc, Mexico, in 1922.

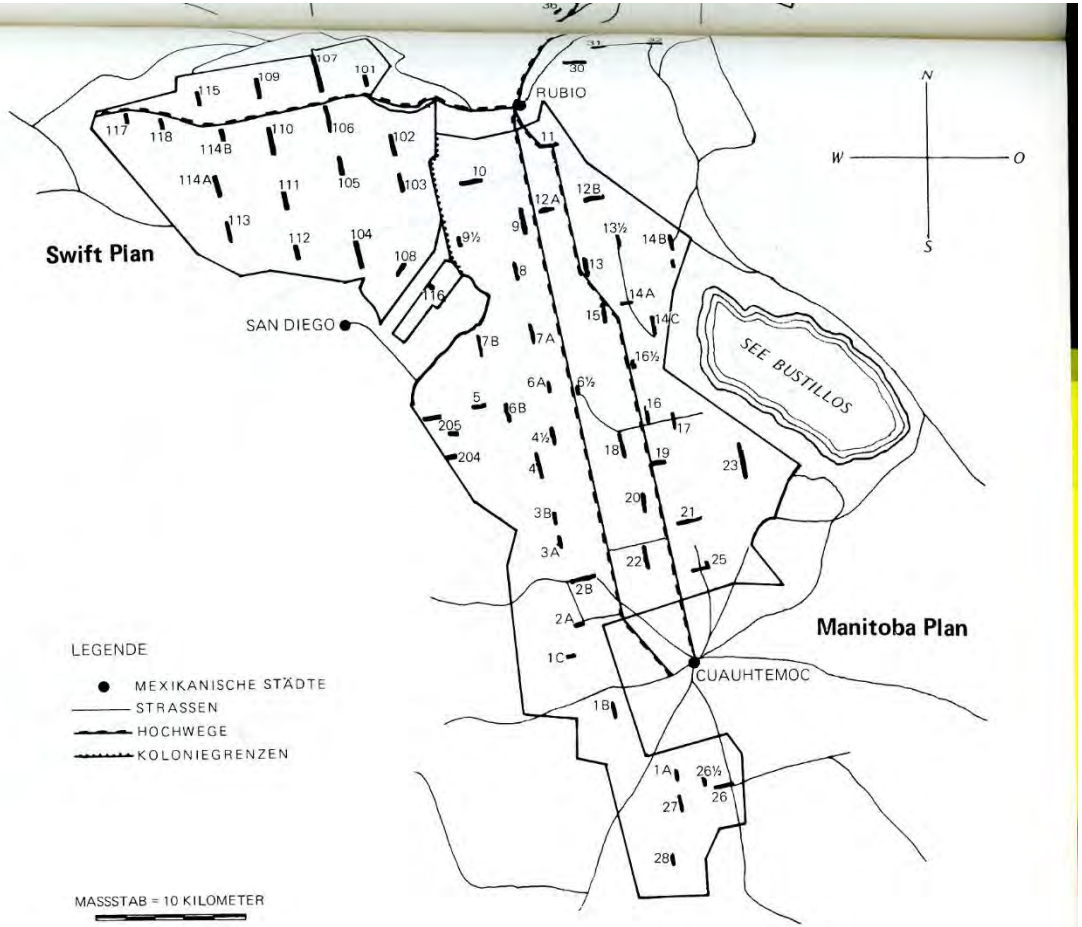


LANDKARTE DER KOLONIEN BEI CUAUHTEMOC, 1980



1 A	Kleefeld
1 B	Neuendorf
1 C	Thalbach
2 A	Gnadenthal
2 B	Gnadenfeld
3 A	Hamburg
4	Reinland
4½	Neureinland
5	Gruenthal
6 A	Rosenthal
6 B	Rosenort
6½	Lowefarm
7 A	Rosenfeld
7 B	Rosengart
8	Reinfeld
9	Kronsthal
9½	Kronsfeld
10	Hochfeld
11	Einlage
12 A	Schoenthal
12 B	Hoffnungsfeld
13	Neuhorst
13½	Eigenheim
14 A	Eichenfeld
14 B	Hochstaedt
14 C	Edenburg
15	Blumengart
16	Blumenfeld
16½	Gruenland
17	Friedensruh
18	Osterwick
19	Schanzenfeld
20	Schoenwiese
21	Neuenburg
22	Blumenort
23	Waldheim
25	Blumenthal
26	Silberfeld
26½	Neusilberfeld
72	Rotfeld
73	Horndean
74	Weidenthal
75 A	
75 B	
78	Waldfeld
79	Schoenwald
80	Bachthal

27	Kronsgart	81	Steinfeld
28	Weidenfeld	82	Steinthal
30	Heuboden	83	Steinwiese
31	Hoffnungsau	84	Eichenbach
32	Hoffnungsau	85	Fernwald
36	Neuhof	86	Fernthal
38	Steinreich	87	Braunfeld
40	Bergthal	101	Neustaedt
41	Springfeld	102	Blumenheim
42	Blumstein	103	Blumenhof
42 B	Rudnerweide	104	Rosenhof
43	Rosenheim	105	Neuanlage
44	Springstein	106	Schoenfeld
45	Cordovana	107	Burwalde
46	Ebenfeld	108	Edenthal
50	Springthal	109	Gruenfeld
51	Weidenfeld	110	Neuhoffnung
51 A		111	Neurecht
51 T	Edenthal	112	Grossweide
52	Schoenthal	113	Schoenberg
52 A	Silberfeld	114 A	Hoffnungsthal
53	Sommerfeld	114 B	Eigenhof
53 A	Neuanlage	115	Schoendorf
54	Blumenthal	116	Edenfeld
55	Halbstadt	117	Kleinstaedt
59	Hochthal	118	Bachfeld
60	Hoffnungsthal	204	Reinthal
61	Waldreich	205	Rosenbach
62	Kr	251	Springwasser
63	Olgafeld	252	Kleindorf
64 A	Schoenau	253	Gruenwald
64 B		254	Hoffnungsort
65		301	Thalheim
66	Fernheim	302	Gruenland
67	Lichtfeld	303	Steinberg
68	Silberthal	304	Springstein
69	Eichenthal	305	Ebenfeld
70	Felsenthal	306	Eichenbach



3. Mexico Today and Yesterday

The chronicler David Rempel has described briefly in his diary and letters what the delegates had seen and experienced on their historic trip to Mexico. But beyond that, what did the Colonists know about this fabulous, strangely mysterious land in which they had decided to pitch their tents?

INHABITANTS, DIMENSIONS, ORGANIZATION

At the time of the immigration in the year 1922, Mexico counted in round numbers sixteen million inhabitants. Of these, six million were pure Indians, seven million were of mixed races; the rest, three million, were Creoloes and whites from outside Mexico – a sparse population for a country consisting of almost two million square kilometers (approximately 750,000 square miles), making it four times as large as the German empire under Wilhelm II.

In the meantime, the population has increased almost to a point that is worrisome. The government has long preached the need for smaller families, so that fewer people will be able to live better. Today, hardly half a century since the Mennonites arrived in Mexico, it has become a nation of sixty-seven million.

Mexico is a federal republic consisting of thirty-two states. In its political organization it resembles, at least outwardly, the United States. At the head of the country is the president of the republic, elected for a term of six years. The people are represented by a congress divided into two houses, or chambers – the house of representatives and the senate. The individual states, designating themselves as “free and sovereign”, have their own organization and representation of the people and elect their own governors. A further important factor in the administrative apparatus in Mexico is the “free municipality”, an ancient democratic institution which goes back to the heyday of Spain; it has preserved to this day a considerable freedom of action and the stamp of time-proven dignity for city administration.

CLIMATE AND SOIL CONDITIONS

As for climate, Mexico, as in so many other ways, is a land of all imaginable contrasts. Whereas almost unbearable heat predominates in the coastal lowlands and in the states of the lower regions toward the south, the climate in the higher regions, depending on the altitude, is subtropical and more moderate. In the higher reaches of the Sierra Madre to the north, there are areas where it gets remarkably cold, so that one who is inexperienced and neglects to supply himself with warm clothes often finds that even in the middle of an otherwise hot summer, he cannot sleep at night because of the cold.

Precipitation is irregular and as a rule limited to the rainy season, during which, after the long dry spell, there is an overabundance of rain, accompanied by heavy storms, so that access to the rural areas

of the south and the middle plain is often impossible for weeks on end because of impassable country roads.

The northern part receives less precipitation. The area from Coahuila to the Rio Grande and on into Texas and New Mexico has, in accordance with its desert landscape, a harsh desert climate, with the exception of the regions that rise to higher altitudes with the Sierra Madre, in which the Old Colony Mennonites of Cuauhtemac are located. Here, surrounded by widely spread mountains, we find the high prairie land with a corresponding cooler climate.

Only limited areas of Mexico are suitable for farming. It is a land of mountains and high plains, which, for the most part, vary in altitude from 1000 to 2200 metres above sea level. Giant mountain ranges cross the country lengthwise, in the north the wild Sierra Madre with the barrancas, the deeply fizzured canyons, and in the south the mighty volcanos, crowned by eternal snow, such as the legendary Popocatepetl, Ixtaccihuatl, and the Pico de Orizaba, the last named towering to 5,700 meters. They emboss upon Mexico the uniquely bizarre character that is so unforgettable to all visitors.

MEXICAN IMAGES

Steel blue sky, colossal mountains, their peaks covered with snow; wild gorges above which the eagle soars; landscapes that are gigantic; coasts on whose beaches thunder the waves of two oceans; tropical hinterlands with primeval forests, the home of exotic plants and animals – that is Mexico.

And the colorful images, which once seen cannot again be struck from memory—pictures that exist only here, in unique, fabulous Mexico, such as enchanting little villages with flat-roofed, brightly calcimined adobe buildings; colonial Spanish churches, from the most imposing cathedrals in the large cities to the most modest village chapels; palm trees and maguey plants yielding pulque, the intoxicating drink common to the country; thornbush and cactus jungles and next to them fig and orange trees, pomegranates and mangos; weathered wooden crosses beside wilderness trails atop stony hilltops; flowers and markets in a splendor of intoxicating colors; white-garbed Indians wearing hats as large as wheels; barefooted brown women in shawls, carrying their babies on their backs; and on the plaza and the alameda, narrow-footed ladies of captivating charm, slender as gazelles, dressed with an elegance that no one can copy; politicians and rich people of all types and shading; charro horsemen and chinas poblanas in colorful national costumes; strange soldiery and local policemen with wide ammunition belts and large pistols; cowboys in leather chaps and clinking spurs. And so, no one could long continue to call forth image upon image describing one thing: Mexico, our Mexico!

INDIANS

In the middle of the tropical forests, away from the ebb and flow of modern life, lie the ruins that are the remains of a legendary barbaric yet grandiose past, which looks at us today from the veiled, unfathomably deep eyes of mysterious Indian tribes.

We know that the language of the land is Spanish, but even today there are still more than fifty living Indian languages in the country. Several million Indians still do not know Spanish, declining to

learn it because to them it is the language of foreign conquerors. In their inaccessible mountain and canyon retreats, they lead an existence almost untouched from the outside; until now neither the mission endeavors of the Catholic Church, nor the efforts of the government, which has been particularly zealous in this matter during recent years, have been able to tempt them to civilization.

The only Indians still to be found near our Mennonites in the state of Chihuahua are the Tarahumaras. In the mountains of the Sierra Madre they live as primitive aborigines and shy strangers to the world. Their number is estimated at 45,000, but no one knows precisely how many there still are. Only a small fraction of them have been converted to Christianity or become civilized, in spite of the fact that there has been no lack of long and patient efforts on the part of the Church. As to mission efforts among them, the German Jesuit, Father Hermann Glandorff, became particularly well-known some two hundred years ago for his outstanding accomplishments. He is still remembered today among Christian Indians in the region of Tomochic and is honored as a saint.

However, when the Tarahumaras congregate for their great annual autumn festival, which they celebrate with footraces and ceremonies and by becoming intoxicated on corn wine, large groups of still uncivilized Indians are immediately recognizable because they always sit with their backs to any church building or Christian cross.

The Tarahumaras Indians have an international reputation as the most enduring runners in the world. Their accomplishments in this respect are astonishing. They still hunt deer without firearms, pursuing the animal on foot until hounded to death, it collapses and becomes their spoil. They are a timeless people; the Spaniards came upon them four hundred years ago exactly as they are today.

The still standard work on the Tarahumaras was written by the great Norwegian explorer, Carl Lumholtz, at the end of the last century. Later interesting works on them were published by the German Rudolf Zabel and the Americans Benneth and Zingg.

Where today the Mennonites cultivate the land in complete peace, the Apaches – in contrast to the Tarahumaras – were still making the area unsafe a hundred years ago by plundering and burning villages and ranchos, until Mexican government troops were able to root them out and destroy them completely. I have known many an old Indian fighter who still remembered stories to tell of the feared "IndioJeronimo" and Ju, the last of the Apaches. Today the Apaches are for the inhabitants of the area from Santa Isabel up to Madera and Casa Grandes only a disquieting memory.

HISTORICAL DIVISION

One would almost like to shrink back from the task of giving a historical overview, even if only an approximate one, of this interesting country in which the Mennonite Colonists have settled, for the history of Mexico is so fantastic, so unsettling and overwhelming that I have never understood how certain authors have come to terms with it in a manner that is not only superficial but actually frivolous. One should read rather works such as that of a Lucas Alaman, or a Vicente Riva Palacio, Carlos Pereyra or Jose Vasconcelos. They leave us dumb with astonishment over the powerful impressions and the extensiveness of the material, which seems almost incomprehensible and hardly capable of being mastered.

But if this book is to claim integrity, we cannot omit from it an outline even if only a fragmentary one, of the history of the fabulous land in which the Old Colonists found a home. For to settle in a country as unique as Mexico and to build a colony there of many thousands whose children will one day become citizens of this land without picking up along the way at least an elementary knowledge of its history is hardly imaginable. And if I now attempt to give in what follows such an indispensable historical overview, I am aware from the start that it will have unavoidable shortcomings, even though I will make an effort to present in concise outlines that which is essential.

Perhaps we can make our presentation and an understanding of it less difficult if we divide the history of Mexico into four epochs.

The first of these epochs includes the pre-Spanish period, a gray past which is concealed in a fog of uncertainty until the year 1519, when the Spanish conquerors first set foot on the soil of the American mainland to stay there.

The second period includes the fantastic expedition for conquest by Hernan Cortes, unique in the history of the world, and the colonial period that followed, during which Mexico was named "New Spain" and was governed by viceroys.

The third epoch begins with the declaration of independence in 1810 and includes the reign of Emperor Iturbidi, the storm and stress period of the Republic, the war with North America, the Maximilian empire, and the thirty years of peace under Porifirio Diaz.

The final period begins with the great revolution of 1910, which introduced an entirely new epoch of social upheaval and goes on to the present, specifically – for the purposes of this book – to the arrival of the Old Colony in Mexico.

1. THE PRE-SPANISH PERIOD (-1519)

THE ORIGINAL INHABITANTS OF MEXICO

Scientists and historians still do not agree on where the original inhabitants of Mexico came from. According to one theory, they migrated from Asia by way of a pre-historic land bridge located where the Bering Strait is today; according to a second theory, they immigrated from the opposite direction, by way of the legendary continent of Atlantis; finally, there are those who believe in their indigenous origin on the American continent itself.

Unless completely new discoveries are made, the most likely probabilities as of today speak for the first-mentioned theory. From a purely external point of view, the facial features of the Indian are remarkably Asiatic. The shape of the skull, the high cheekbones and the eyes noticeably resemble Mongoloid features. In addition, it is noteworthy that in legend and history all the peoples of the large Nahua family trace their origin from the north; most distinctly is this the case of the Taltecs and Aztecs, who claim to have come from the "Land of the Seven Caves," or Aztlan, the "Land of the Heron." Pereyra ascertains that there is a common language thread which is traceable from Utah in the USA to Guatemala, even to Nicaragua.

The best known of the ancient peoples who at one time inhabited Mexico are the Mayas and the Aztecs. At the time of the Spanish Conquest, what had once been the settlements of the Mayas in Tabasco, Guatemala, and Honduras already lay in ruins. Nothing specific is know about why or when

these settlements fell to ruin or why their inhabitants migrated to Yucatan. The ruins of their cities are among the most impressive among those found in Mexico.

Of greatest importance in the actual history of Mexico are the Aztecs, for when the Spaniards arrived, they were not only the lords of Anahuac, the wide, high valley in which Texcoco Lake with the capital city is located, but they also ruled over a great number of subjugated and enslaved peoples. The Aztecs' immediate predecessors had been the Chichemecs, who – around the year 1000 – had brought to an end the domination of the highly developed Toltecs that had reigned before them and whose capital was Tula.

QUETZALCOATL

The Toltecs are said to have left the "Land of the Seven Caves" around the year 600. Its geographic location is believed by some to have been in New Mexico, where Pueblo Indians still live in caves. Their priest-king, Quetzalcoatl, the "feathered serpent" who was eventually elevated to the status of a god and symbol of peace, led them to a high point in development. He abhorred human sacrifices, which were customary among almost all Mexican peoples, and proclaimed freedom and brotherly love, just as do the teachings of Christianity. Furthermore, he carried a staff with a crook, similar to the crosier carried by Christian bishops, and his cloak was strewn with crosses. Many historians have suspected, perhaps not wrongly, that we may be concerned here with a Christian missionary who for some unknown reason became stranded on the American coast long before the discovery of America.

The suppressed but, among the Chichemecs and Aztecs, still vital belief in Quetzalcoatl and his promised return was of extraordinary significance in the Spanish conquest of the country, for many of the peoples enslaved by the Aztecs believed that Cortes was the successor Quetzalcoatl, or even the deliverer himself, come to save them, a circumstance that fell into the lap of the Spaniards like a gift from heaven.

THE MULTIPLICITY OF PEOPLES

Many tribes, often very different from each other, inhabited what is Mexico today. It is estimated that there were nearly three hundred of them; they had their own languages and had no special connections among themselves and no concept of living in a common homeland to which they all belonged. Among the tribes that inhabited the Valley of Anahuac were the Olmecs and the Otomis. Their place of origin is unknown. It is known only that they preceded the Chichimecs and the Toltecs. That may have been a very long time ago, perhaps about the time of the birth of Christ, maybe even sooner. No one is sure. Scholars like to refer to them as the original inhabitants of the high valley of Mexico. As for the Otomis, considerable numbers of them are still extant. It seems that they themselves were never a ruling people, but always served as human work animals for whoever were their conquerors at the time, including the Spaniards, and that such is their lot even today.

It is quite otherwise with the Tlaxcaltecs. They are considered to be an advanced branch of the Chichemecs, with an impressive civilization and a democratic form of government, but just as fierce as the Aztecs, whose hereditary enemies they were and remained to the end. Long before the arrival of the latter, they occupied their free mountain realm where today are located the state and the city of Tlaxcala.

"The undying hatred of the Tlaxcalas destroyed Mexico," says Eduard Stucken in his monumental work, The White Gods. And so it was. After centuries of wars with the Aztecs, who had become all-powerful and remained invincible and undefeated, the Tlaxcaltecs eventually joined forces with Cortes and helped the Spaniards conquer Mexico.

THE AZTECS

Mexico's coat of arms, the eagle on top of a cactus bush with a snake in its beak and claw, represents the founding of the city of Tenochtitlan in the middle of Texcoco Lake. In pursuance of an ancient promise, the warlike Aztecs, after seven centuries of migrations, built here their capital city and the temples of their bloodthirsty gods. They created a powerful domain, with an astonishing and impressive, but fierce and barbaric civilization, which was destroyed forever only two hundred years later by foreign conquerors, assisted by the victims of their own rule of force, their own subjugated brother people.

The might of the Aztecs, originally sustained by a politically wise federation of cities surrounding the lake and an admirable administrative organization and an all-powerful priesthood, seemed for a time to be invincible. But as this power became ever more brutal and despotic, depending more and more on the warring strength of the jaguar and eagle legions, which were conducting never-ending wars in all corners of the realm, constantly enslaving new tribes, and the human sacrifices on the temple pyramids of Tenochtitlan, where unfortunate victims by the tens of thousands had to bleed to death every year, eventually became so numerous that the people began to tremble before the insatiable lust of the Aztec gods, the worm began to gnaw at this gruesome magnificence.

It was in this condition that the Aztec realm, seen as so indescribably splendid from the outside, found itself under the godlike ruler, Montezuma II, when the announcement came to the palace of Tenochtitlan of the arrival of the eleven ships with which Hernan Cortes had gone to anchor in the vicinity of what is today the city of Veracruz.

2. THE SPANISH COLONIAL PERIOD (1519-1810)

We now come to that remarkable period of time when the history of Mexico becomes a part of world history, doing so in a manner so fantastic and so completely unlikely that one may search in vain in all the annals of the histories of the peoples of this earth to find something similar.

HERNAN CORTES

At the beginning of this turning point, there is one name, the historical figure of a man whose towering personality and historic deeds of world-wide importance became a determining factor in the fate and future of Mexico; a personality whose spirit and reflection reaches not only into the Mexico of today, but will live on as long as there is a concept of Latin America: Hernan Cortes.

From the eleven "water houses" which the messengers of Montezuma had announced in Tenochtitlan debarked six hundred white bearded men, a hundred of them sailors, the rest soldiers. The "white gods", under the leadership of their commanding general, Hernan Cortes, brought with them

sixteen horses, several cannons, and a supply of muskets, which called forth the impression among the Indians that these white beings "commanded thunder and lightning." In other words, they were held to be gods.

The sharpest weapon at the disposal of the great conqueror, however, was a woman, Malinche, christened Dona Marina, by the Spaniards. The daughter of a cacique woman of high rank, Malinche had through politics and betrayal been sold as a slave and was finally given as a gift, together with twenty other girls, to the Spaniards in Tabasco. And so, the fanatical hatred she demonstrated against her own kin and which caused her to throw herself into the arms of Cortes was understandable. Honoring him at first as the returning Quetzalcoatl and her kind protector, she eventually learned to love and admire him with utmost devotion as a man and a conqueror. She knew the Aztec language, as well as the language spoken in Tabasco. She became Cortes' lucky star, whom she served as an invaluable interpreter, political aid, and as an entirely irreplaceable stateswoman. Without Malinche, it is impossible to imagine the conquest of Mexico; except for her, it might well have failed.

Cortes was a master at organization and knew how to use all means at his disposal, including this woman. And so, firmly believing that his was a Christian political mission, he was able to set out at the head of a handful of Spanish soldiers and adventurers upon an unprecedented campaign in an enemy country of which nothing was known and to crush completely within two years, the realm of the Aztecs, to found the New Spain Colony, and to establish Christianity of the American continent.

THE MARCH OF THE FOUR HUNDRED

Cortes' campaign began with four hundred men; the rest were dead or sick or had to stay behind to guard the newly established Veracruz. He embarked on his campaign after he had carried out his notable, heroic decision, the likes of which the world had not seen since the crossing of the Rubicon, namely, the destruction of his ships. By this means he decisively broke the back of the rebellion among his men; every hope of turning back that still slumbered in weak hearts was now an impossibility.

What ordinarily might have been as expedition undertaken purely for spoil, for the acquisition of gold and other treasures, was now to become the conquest he had planned from the beginning, one that was to win for the king, possessions, new lands, and new subjects and for the Church, new powers and believers, and for himself, riches and undying fame. He had spared a single ship, which he now dispatched to the King of Spain, heavily loaded with Aztec gold and treasures, with messengers and reports.

TLAXCALA AND THE BLOODBATH OF CHOLULA

By way of Cempoala, the capital city of the Totonacs, with whom Cortes quickly makes friends, he marches westward and inland, already followed by Indian confederates and porters, who help him transport his supplies and cannons. For days and weeks the small force marches through the heat of tropical forests, suffering nights of fever, climbing rugged mountains, and crossing pathless wildernesses, until it reaches the foot of the "copper mountain" and the city of Cocotlan, or Keykonakan,

as it is also called; it could only have been what is known today as Peyrote. Here Cortes is coldly received by the chief of the Aztec city and warned for the last time to turn back and go home. Instead he pushes on to the walls of the Tlaxcala area, finds a way through and comes face to face with many thousands of Tlaxcaltecs, with whom he engages in heavy fighting. After days of battle, with the Spaniards still undefeated but nearly finished, Zicotencatl, commanding general of the Tlaxcaltecs, appears and offers peace and friendship and a confederation with Cortes against Montezuma and the Mexicans.

Cortes convinces the Tlaxcaltecs – as he had earlier the Totonacs – of the necessity to abolish the abhorrent blood sacrifices. Then, accompanied by ten thousand Tlaxcaltecs, he moves on to Cholula, where Montezuma intends to lay a trap for him. Cholula was an old priest city with countless idol temples, and Cortes swears an oath to have a Christian church built in this city for every day of the year. He kept his oath. Even today, Cholula is famous for its 365 churches.

Twenty thousand Aztecs who lie in wait before the city, persuade the inhabitants to betray Cortes, and the result is the famous bloodbath which he did not wish, but to which he consented for political reasons. He permitted his Tlaxcaltec confederates free run of their bloody lust; they plundered the city, destroyed idols and temples, violated the inhabitants, branding them with glowing irons and carried them off into slavery.

Such language the Aztecs understood. Until now they had believed that there would be no great difficulties with the cross-bearing whites, who, although they "commanded thunder and lightning," brought with them demonic beings (horses) from a strange world, and possessed mysterious deadly weapons, otherwise came in a mantle of peace, bearing the sign of a peculiar god, who, like Quetzalcoatl, wanted no human sacrifices. But this language which Cortes had spoken in Cholula they understood.

ENTRANCE INTO MEXICO

The first white man to see the fabulous valley of Mexico, in which El Dorado, the gilded sovereign Montezuma reigned, was Captain Diego de Ordaz, who, with a small group of scouts, ascended Popocatepetl and who returned with such a fantastic account of what he had seen that the small band of Christian conquerors, forgetting all their hardships, battles, and complaints, burned more than ever with a zeal to enter this fabulous land of beauty and riches and to annex it to the possessions of the Spanish crown, even though the hindrances appeared clearly insurmountable and the whole undertaking seemed almost insane. Cortez was, perhaps, the only one to realize this fully. And yet, although he had often been wounded, suffered with fever, and was well aware of his great responsibility, this extraordinary man and field commander made his irrevocable decision: he ordered a march to Tenochtitlan.

From the simple notes of Ensign Bernal Diaz del Castillo, the immortal chronicler of that campaign, a man who was there and saw with his own eyes what we can only much more weakly today with a shiver in our innermost being, we are able to picture dimly for ourselves what the Spaniards

beheld when they saw between the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl the fabulous valley of Anahuac, which until then had been known only to the Indians.

There it lay, the mighty city of Tenochtitlan, like a giant silver spider in the middle of Texcoco Lake, with its countless temple pyramids, its exotic palaces, flower and zoological gardens, its many-branched canal system, and its sea of white-painted stone houses shimmering and glistening as though made of pure silver. What European eyes saw there for the first time, so magnificent, so overwhelming was like some landscape of the moon or distant planet on which one had been cast as if by a miracle.

Three fortified causeways led to the heart of the water city. And on the shores of the large Texcoco Lake lay, readily recognizable and hardly less splendid, the sister cities of Tlatelolco, Itztapalapan, Tlacopan (today's Tacuba), and Texcoco, where less than a century before the Indian poet-prince Netzahualcoyotl had ruled and which later, under Ixtilxochitl, who, insulted by Montezuma and, known as the "black flower," was to contribute to the downfall of Mexico.

As in a dream the Spanish warriors and adventurers descended into the valley of Anhuac; as in a dream they saw the "Lord of the World," Montezuma II, adorned by the imperial diadem, wearing his magnificent mantle of feather mosaic and the golden sandals – saw him, to whose godlike splendor no one dared to raise an eye, receive their commander, Cortes, both men hiding behind a mask of feigned friendliness. And as in a dream they entered the capital city, the citizens outwardly welcoming them as guests, at the same time waiting with a deadly hatred for the moment when these foreign intruders would be destroyed and triumphantly sacrificed on the temple pyramid of Huitzilopochtl.

Now follows an incredibly daring act on the part of the commanding general. In the very heart of the city he takes the emperor out of his own palace and places him in custody. There follows next a hurried march back to the coast, in order to attack the traitorous Panfilio Narvaez, newly arrived in superior strength, whom Cortes defeats and whose Spanish troops he incorporates as a welcome addition to his tiny force. Next there is a hurried march back across deserts and mountains to the Aztec capital to rescue from harassment the small detachment he had left behind.

THE "DISMAL NIGHT"

And now the masks have fallen from the hypocritical faces, and there follows the unavoidable battle with the Aztecs. Suffering a terrible slaughter, the Spaniards are driven out of the capital. Cortes loses everything in this historic "noche triste," the dismal night," as after a horrible bloodbath he is forced to leave the city in retreat. But even in this moment of greatest set-back, the loss of innumerable of his faithful and fabulous riches in gold, Cortes, crying in defeat under the historic ahuehuete tree of Tacuba, again gathers his unconquerable strength and reaches once more for the stars.

He withdraws fighting. Bleeding from a thousand wounds sustained by his troops, he beats his way back across the mountains of Tlaxcala, where, not admitting defeat, he prepares a second assault of the capital, this time not from behind the mask of a friendly politician, but with the iron fist of a warrior and general. And he does not commence the great attack until the last detail has been masterfully planned and prepared.

He orders boats built, which, carried down to Texcoco Lake on the shoulders of Indians, he will use to attack the city from the water. He sends his men – never has such a venture, bordering on madness, been repeated – to the crater of Popocatepetl to bring down sulphur, so that his cannon and muskets can be supplied with gunpowder. He drills his own men and the Indian troops that will join him for the battle they face, a battle such as no one has attempted in hundreds of years, namely, an attack on the ”heart of the world,” the mighty capital in the middle of the lake.

And then he once more advances down into the valley of Anahuac.

THE DOWNFALL OF THE AZTEC EMPIRE

The irresolute, hesitating Montezuma is dead. He has been replaced by Cuauhtemoc, courageous and proven in war. Tenochtitlan, awaiting the onslaught of the “white gods,” has become a mighty fortress. Cortes commences the attack with approximately a thousand Spaniards and seven thousand Tlaxcaltec confederates, an undertaking unprecedented in boldness. He attacks in a manner heretofore unknown on Texcoco Lake, his brigands approaching from the water. He would never have succeeded had not the lake cities, such as Texcoco, Ixtapalapan, Coyotlan, Xochimilco, and others joined him, as he had shrewdly calculated that they would. They greeted the opportunity to shake the yoke of Tenochtitlan.

The struggle for the capital becomes a bloodbath without comparison. It proceeds foot by foot, from house to house, temple to temple. The Aztecs defend themselves with a complete disdain for death. But Cortes is a master whom they cannot match. After seventy-five days of uninterrupted fighting, the capital falls. Cauauhtemoc is taken prisoner. The historic words with which the last Aztec descends from the stage of history are the following:

> “I have done all I could to defend my city and my people.
> Before you, my conqueror, I stand against my will as a
> prisoner. Take this dagger and kill me.”

The great Cortes took the dagger but did not kill the prisoner. Instead he stepped up to him and embraced him. He honored his defeated enemy, who did not lose his life until much later on Cortes’ famous expedition to the Hibueras.

Riva Palcio writes of this historic moment when the victor and the vanquished stood across from each other as follows:

> “Evening was coming to an end, promising a storm.
> Between the red clouds, which looked like blood, the
> fifth sun of the Mexicans set forever behind the clouds.”
> It was August 13, 1521.
> The Aztec empire was dead.

THE REALM “IN WHICH THE SUN NEVER SETS”

The many Indian peoples, most of whom were hostile to each other and who had no sense of belonging to a common nation of their own, had become the great colonial empire called New Spain, vastly expanded to the south, west, and north by Cortes and other conquerors. Now one could rightly say in Spain, "In the realm of Charles V., the sun never sets." The man, however, whom Spain had so much to thank for, Hernan Cortes, suffered in the end the fate of so many really great men. He died forgotten and in disgrace, and one is forced to ascertain that until even the most recent times, there has been a sad tendency among many writers and historians to belittle the towering figure that was Cortes by trying to put him down as a simple adventurer and gold seeker who happened to be blessed with a super abundance of good luck. One asks himself who or what is served by such a deplorable representation. However, a further discussion of this kind of question does not belong here.

Mexico was now governed out of Spain. A long line of viceroys came and went, among them only a few of any significance, such as Mendoza at the beginning and Baccareli and Galvez toward the end of the colonial period. Since the Spaniards did not exterminate the Indians root and branch, Mexico became a land of mixed races, in which the white element was the predominating force, and the Indian remained suppressed until the slowly growing mixed race that stood between the two was able to prepare a way to a beginning of equalization.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW SPAIN COLONY

What was particularly tragic regarding the fate of Mexico during the centuries of its colonial period was the fact that it had to move forward and develop itself during a time in which the Spanish motherland was descending from its position as a dominating force in the world, first slowly and unnoticeably, then, however, more and more quickly. And so the colony was exploited, until at times it was bled white, to help stop the decline of the motherland, or, at least, to postpone what in reality could no longer be avoided.

The development of the colony was, nevertheless, astonishing. Monk and priest followed the sword of the conqueror. Everywhere where at one time had stood the temples to idols, beautiful Christian houses of worship were built in the Spanish Colonial style, which had become famous. The cathedral of Mexico City is still the largest, most impressive church edifice in all of the American continent. Upon the great accomplishments of the Catholic Church, however, of bringing civilization to America and transplanting European culture on its soil fell the dark shadow of the Inquisition period, which lasted for a long time, transforming what had been at first the enlightening, cheerful work of the Christian missionaries into a dark, oppressive force of fanatical zeal.

In spite of that, Mexico claimed for a time the first place among the developing lands of the continent, including those of North America, where things were just beginning. Before the first school appeared in North America, Mexico was already offering instruction in universities and presenting operatic productions in the capital city. The establishment of the first printing press on American soil was the work of a German, Johann Cromberger. Another German, Heinrich Martin, called Enrico Martinez, was first to begin the mighty labor of draining Texcoco Lake, so the capital could spread out

and grow on dry land. In Mexico, too, appeared the first newspaper on the continent, the El Mercurio Volante.

Rich mines were exploited and culture was fostered side by side as libraries were established, imposing buildings erected, and Christian missions extended far into all regions, including some of those in what is today the United States.

From the year 1588, when the "invincible armada" of Phillip II was decisively defeated by the English, Spanish dominance of the oceans began to wane, eventually giving way to the sea and world power of the British. From that time on the might of Spain suffered decline.

Thanks to the wealth from the possessions across the sea, Spain was able for two hundred more years to hold together as a colonial power. But when the struggle for independence on the part of the relatively young English colonies in North America succeeded, and when on top of that the French Revolution threw its incendiary torch among all who felt themselves oppressed, the unavoidable was at hand: the demand for independence from the motherland, the compelling insistence on self-determination, the uprising against the Spanish crown.

3. (1828-1910)

INDEPENDENCE

As early as 1808, aspirations for disassociation from Spain made themselves known everywhere in the land, furthered by the disconcerting political situation at the time in Spain itself. But not until the evening of September 15, 1810 is the historical "grito de independicia," the cry of independence, heard from the throat of the priest Miguel Hidalgo in the village of Dolores, calling the people to open rebellion. After brief local triumphs, the movement collapses, and a year later Father Hidlago and other leaders of the movement are shot in the city of Chihuahua.

ITURBIDE

But the spark does not die under the ashes. In the meanwhile, another Catholic priest, Father Morelos, comes to the fore and wins a few successes. He is demoted by the church, taken prisoner, and executed in 1815. In the years following, the next movement, this time better prepared, is readied. The new leaders are a former colonel in the Spanish Army, Augustia de Iturbide, and a general, Vincente Guerrero. In February of 1821, they proclaim the "Plan of Iguala" under the motto of independence, unity, religion. According to these three points, Iturbide calls his people's army the "Army of the Three Guarantees," with which, under the green, white, and red flag of his own design, he marches victoriously into the capital in September of 1821.

The reign of Spain in Mexico has ended.

YEARS OF STORM AND STRESS

What comes now is the kaleidoscopic unwinding of a tape, as it were, of political, warlike, and social events, which, because they are so numerous, tend to confuse and are difficult to keep straight. President succeeds president, overthrow follows overthrow, and one proclamation comes on the heels of another, all bogging down in the end in what is traditional. These are the storm and stress years of a young nation, which, influenced by forces that oppose each other, is pulled back and forth. During this time, too, the United States begins to concern itself with the restless neighbors to the south.

Still dependent on European conditions, Iturbide becomes the emperor of Mexico is 1822, but just two years later, he is overthrown and shot. General Guadalupe Victoria now becomes the first president of what is from now on proclaimed to be a republic. In 1827, blind fanatics order the expulsion of the Spaniards, whom, in reality, the country has to thank for everything it has in the way of material and intellectual goods. In 1829, the former general in the fight for independence, Vicente Guerrero, becomes president, but two years later, he, too, is shot as a traitor, just as had been Iturbide.

SANTA ANNA – WAR WITH NORTH AMERICA; THE LOSS OF TEXAS, NEW MEXICO, ARIZONA, AND CALIFORNIA

Again, presidents come and go, until the establishment in 1833 of the dictatorship of Santa Anna, which will be interrupted a number of times and have very sad consequences for Mexico as a nation. Santa Anna not only overburdens the country with excessive military expenditures, but also loses the was with Texas, this giant state that had belonged to Mexico before declaring its independence in 1835. And if that isn't enough, after several changes in government, Santa Anna, again president of Mexico, loses the war that begins with the United States in 1846 and ends with the peace treaty of Guadalupe in 1848, as a consequence of which the states of New Mexico, Arizona, and California are relinquished to the victors for fifteen million pesos in compensation.

The only thing that Mexico rescued out of this war was the memory of the "heroic children," as they are called in the vernacular, those very young cadets who defended the honor of Mexico on the hill of Chapultepec and sealed it with their blood.

That Santa Anna could not remain at the head of the government after such a catastrophic administration is understandable. Less comprehensible, however, is the fact that several years later, after more, mostly violent changes of presidents, he was again called back and once more made head of state. And so, this man was given the further opportunity of selling to the United States also the southern part of Arizona, which until now had been left in the possession of Mexico.

LIBERAL REFORMS

With the "Plan of Ayutla" and the final overthrow of Santa Anna, the first period of Mexican independence, characterized by so much violence, came to an end, only to give way to a second, no less unsettled period of so-called "liberal reform." Even though outwardly, this reform appeared to be of an entirely political character, in actuality it amounted to an avowed religious war, one that was not

conducted against an external enemy, but rather against the Catholic Church and the ruling clergy in the land.

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST CATHOLICISM

At that time – again under changing presidents – there was a belief in Mexico, one that was encouraged by Free Masonry, that it would be possible to exclude by means of new, liberal legislation the influence of the Catholic Church on the populace. Church properties, lands, and other possessions of the clergy were confiscated. Educational institutions, including seminaries, as well as welfare establishments, such as hospitals and libraries which had until now been supported by the Church, were closed, and the activity of the priesthood was strictly regulated.

However, even the most notable and probably the most honest reformer Mexico every had, Bonito Juarez, shied away during his administration from the full enforcement of the new laws, knowing full well that the results of applying them would be devastating to the people. And so, he weakened the Mexican struggle against Catholicism by silently leaving to the clergy its churches and dwellings, the curates and cloisters, and by not hindering the priests in any special way from carrying out their duties as spiritual advisers. Later, Porfirio Diaz did likewise, and not until the time of Calles were the laws that had been passed regarding religion radically enforced, only to be overlooked silently again today. Then as now, the Catholic Church did not let itself be driven out of a Catholic land without putting up an opposition.

FRENCH INTERVENTION

The struggle against Catholicism and the continuing reform movements now led to French intervention. On May 5, 1862, the Mexicans won their victory over the French at Pueblo, a victory that is still celebrated annually; actually, it did not gain anything decisive for the Mexicans, for the French reorganized themselves, and despite their initial losses, they occupied Pueblo, then also Mexico City and a large part of the country. Even Chihuahua had for a time a French garrison.

EMPEROR MAXIMILIAN

Under the guardianship of Napoleon III, the imperial crown of Mexico is now offered to a Hapsburger, Prince Maximilian; this offer is an international chess move through which the Catholic party of Mexico hopes that the struggle against Catholicism will be decided in its favor. Maximilian accepts the crown. He and his young wife, Charlotte, who, tragically, became well-known, leave their Austrian home and the luxury of Europe in order to assist – so they believe – the Mexican people far across the ocean in achieving national unity. The pair enters the capital on June 12, 1864, jubilantly welcomed by the populace.

The new emperor makes a sincere attempt to give the country a beneficial administration and to bridge and unite the glaring contradictions among the political parties. He tried to be to the troubled people a generous, just, sovereign, but it is all in vain. Hardly two years pass before the old difficulties again come to the fore.

BENITO JUAREZ

Although the republican government of Benito Juarez has been scattered by French bayonets, it has never completely disbanded. Juarez finds support in North America for the legality of his claims to the government, and the French have hardly shown their intentions to withdraw before he again appears on the scene. Napoleon III, recognizing the hopelessness of the whole situation, decides to clear out of Mexico and suggests to Maximilian that he leave with the French troops. But this noble prince proudly declines the suggestion. He believes that he owes it to his own self-respect and to those Mexicans who have been faithful to him not to abandon his post, even if, as is the case without any doubt, his situation is hopeless. The tragedy ends when he is taken prisoner in Queretaro, condemned to death and shot on the "Glockenhuegel" [bell hill] by the victorious republicans.

PORFIRIO DIAZ

The liberal cause had succeeded. Don Benito Juarez and the republicans returned, but so did the old unrest and grievances, until in 1876, General Porfirio Diaz took over the presidency, which stayed in his hands, except for a short intervening period of six years, until 1910.

Only now, after almost a hundred years of unrest and unfortunate experimentation, during which the progress of the country had been hampered correspondingly, was Mexico to get for the first time a stable, durable government. In the thirty years of peace that followed, Mexico was able to concentrate on itself. True, Porfirio Diaz governed with an iron fist, eventually earning for himself the reputation of a dictator, but if his regime was a dictatorship, it was a beneficial one, for at no other time has Mexico blossomed as it did under his rule. Mining and oil concessions to foreign entrepreneurs with an abundance of capital resulted in new, heretofore unknown wealth. Trade and industry flourished as never before. Agricultural production increased, so that Mexico was able to export some its farm products. There was a fabulous growth in the livestock population. Railroads were built, which, with but few later additions, still supply the necessary means of transportation in the land. Connections with the outside world were strengthened. Under Porfirio Diaz, Mexico became a modern country.

4. THE MODERN PERIOD (1919 -)

REVOLT

The period of peace maintained with an iron fist had lasted too long. Certainly, a ruling class had become too secure in the conviction of its infallible power. In all the progress, too little attention had been paid to the common people, the many, yes, the greater majority, consisting of "those at the

bottom," who not only were also alive, but who also wanted a share of the goods and riches of their land, in which the division of wealth was too unequal.

The day came when "those at the bottom" knocked on the bolted gates of the nation and, with weapons in hand, demanded entrance. That was in November of 1910, almost exactly a hundred years after Father Hidlago had called on the people to rise up against Spanish rule. Now the uprising was not against a foreign rule, but against their own president and a system that the common people no longer agreed to put up with.

The first uprisings occurred in Pueblo and Chihuahua in support of the apostle of democracy, Francisco I. Madero. In a few months, the cause of the revolutionaries had succeeded to the extent that Porfirio Diaz had to step down and leave the country.

MEN OF THE REVOLUTION

Only now does the real revolution begin, which for a whole decade will stir and shake up the country to its very core. In the horribly bloody civil war, the great ideals and principles of a Madero are recognizable only at the beginning; eventually they become more and more blurred, deteriorating finally in a conflict of all against all. Besides Madero, who in the course of events is betrayed and shot, the main figures in this drama are General Victoriano Huerta; Pascual Orozco, the now legendary "centaur of the north," this hybrid of robber, patriot, and congenial troop commander, Pancho Villa; the farm leader, Zapata; the presidents that were to come later, namely, Carranza, Obregon, and Calles, of whom only the last named died a natural death; and many, many more.

A TRAGIC DECADE

1911 Madero becomes constitutional president.

1912 Uprising against Madero by Pascual Orozco, who is destroyed in the battle of Bachimba.

1913 Madero is removed and Victoriano Heurta becomes President.

1914 Pancho Villa with his North Division storms south against the usurper and takes Torreon. That same year, the Americans occupy Veracruz. At this time, too, Venustiano Carranza, as supreme commander of the "constitutional army," marches into the capital, accompanied by Villa.

1915 Villa is defeated by Obregon in the great battle of Delaya, in which Obregon loses an arm

1916 In search of revenge, Villa crosses the American border and plunders Columbus, Texas, whereupon General Pershing marches into Chihuahua on his historic punitive expedition.

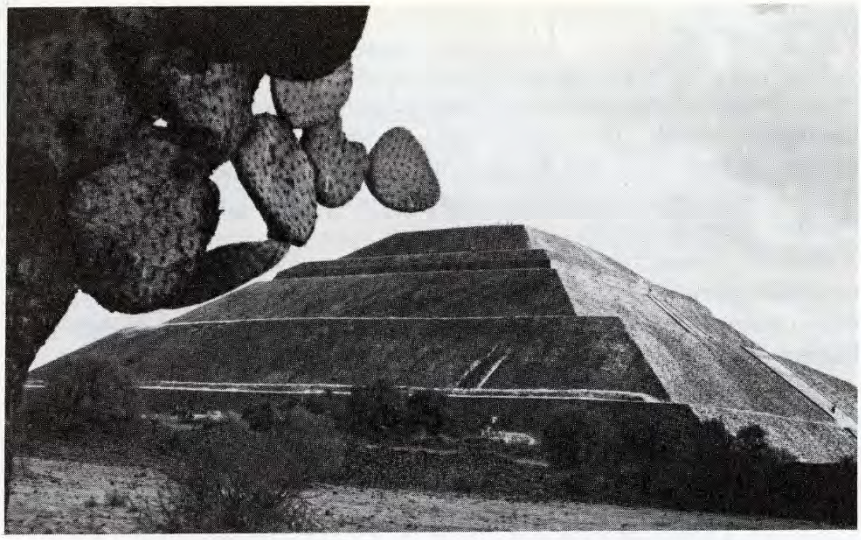
1917 Carranza becomes official president, and a new constitution is formed in Queretaro.

1920 Carranza is overthrown and shot; Adolfo de la Huerta becomes president for the time being; the presidency of General Obregon begins the same year, which finally brings a longer period of peace and with which the revolution is generally considered to have ended. Actually, there are further uprisings, in 1923 by Adolfo de la Huerta, in 1929, the

renovadora of General Gonzalo Escobar, in 1937, the rebellion of Cedillos against President Cardenas, not to mention further incidents of local unrest in individual states.

But let us close this short historical overview at the point in time when our Mennonite immigrants entered the land of their new hope, the year 1922. Let us consider the great revolution ended, even though the social upheavals it caused are far from settled. From now on the history of Mexico becomes something that the Colonists have in common with all the people of Mexico, and in which, through their historical settlement here, they are themselves writing their own chapter.

And so we have sketched in broad strokes the background upon which the further history of the Old Colony in Mexico is taking place.



Die große Sonnenpyramide von San Juan de Teotihuacán in der Nähe von Mexiko-Hauptstadt.

Foto: F. W. Butterlin

Eindrucksvolle Ruinenstätten zeugen von einstiger Pracht altindianischer Baukunst.

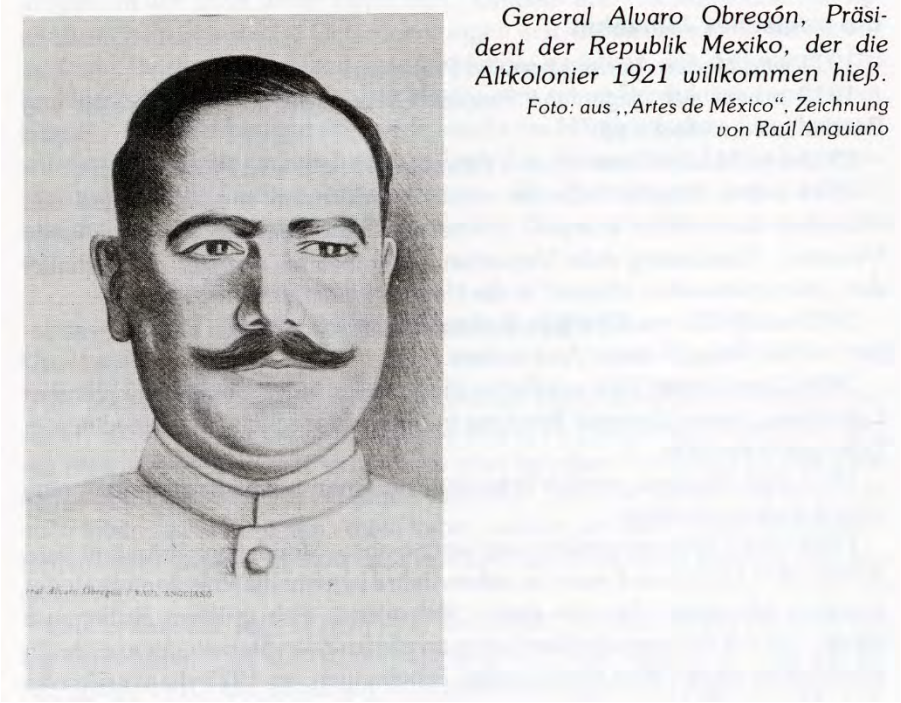
Foto: F. W. Butterlin

Dieser Tarahumara-Indianer hat sich, was selten geschieht, beim Wegebau von den Weißen anheuern lassen.

Foto: über Hermann Pless

Überall ackerten die ,,Rancheros" noch auf primitiver Art auf den Feldern von Chihuahua, wie durch dieses Bild aus dem Jahre 1923 veranschaulicht wird.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus



General Alvaro Obregón, Präsident der Republik Mexiko, der die Altkolonier 1921 willkommen hieß.
Foto: aus ,,Artes de México". Zeichnung von Raúl Anguiano

4. At the Destination

"I CANNOT TURN MY FACE FROM YOU…"

Now there began a migration in the most modern style such as had never been seen anywhere in the world before. When we think of emigrants, we see before our mind's eye, as though it were self-understood, the dramatic picture that once was so common on emigrant ships in large European harbors and then again at the place of destination in the New World: pale, poor, and somewhat frightened people, surrounded by bundles of their pitiful belongings, consisting of only the most essential personal possessions; women lost in misery, their cheeks still wet from the tears they shed when saying farewell at home; grave looking men and innocent children, their wide eyes looking out on a strange world. On the whole, it was a picture of apprehension – the great flight from constriction, poverty, or persecution; the step into the unknown, into adventure; the great hazardous undertaking of the homeless and the home seekers. It was a picture which Ferdinand Freiligrath captured in his immortal poem, "The Emigrants," which begins with the words:

I cannot turn my face from you,
You must I ever contemplate…

A MIGRATION OF A COLONIZING PEOPLE

But no, such was not at all the impression left by the Mennonites migrating from Canada to Mexico. Here an entirely new picture appears before us. A closed colony of many thousands sets out on

a journey, not across the sea, not across half a continent. Nor are they of the poor, the wretched, or the persecuted seeking for better or for worse a new home. They are, rather, well-off, self-confident farming folk, who, as a closed colony with documented privileges, set out on an eight-day cross-country journey to take possession of land purchased in a foreign country with their own, good money. They do not travel with poor bundles of modest possessions, nor do they sit in the poorest, cheapest seats, which they can barely afford, No, they hire whole railroad trains, which are gladly placed at their disposal, and which transplant in long, special trains an entire people across a giant stretch from Canada to Mexico.

That Mexico does not pay for the Colonists' move or place land at their disposal at no cost, as Russia and Canada had done in the past, is of no importance. The Colonists do not ask for help. They have the necessary money and are proud to be able to pay their own way, to stand and walk on their own feet, and even to take along their poor. The migration of the Old Colony to Mexico became a move of a distinctive kind, an extraordinarily expensive undertaking, which was possible only because the necessary money was available.

The special trains arrived at the collecting points and were loaded. Nothing was lacking. The comfort of the emigrants was provided for with passenger coaches, pullman cars with provisions for sleeping, food supplies, ice water. There were freight and cattle cars and complete crews to service the trains and passengers. Thirty, thirty-five, even forty cars to a train were no rarity. In spite of the special rates made possible by the large scale of the operation, the costs were enormous. It wasn't unusual to pay twenty-five, even thirty thousand dollars for a single train.

D.L. Sawatsky reports in his large book on the Mennonites in Mexico that a total of thirty-six trains were chartered to facilitate the move of the Colonists to Mexico. The cost of this move was a matter of no less than almost a million dollars.

DEPARTURE IN GROUPS

Let us focus on one such immigrant train and hurry on ahead of events a bit in order to observe its arrival at its appointed place in distant Mexico. In my diary, I find a description of such an arrival, which over the following years often repeated itself until the entire migration was completed. It wasn't possible, of course, neither was it necessary to transplant the entire Colony at the same time and all at once. This move was less complicated than the move from Russia. Sufficient land had been purchased in advance, and it didn't matter whether all of it was settled in the first, the second, the third or even in a later year. And so, it wasn't absolutely necessary to get rid of house and land in Canada immediately, at possibly half their value, or even to abandon them when leaving.

Today, all that was completely different from the way it had been in Russia. One could calmly take one's time and see to everything little by little as advantageously as possible. Moreover at the time, some 20,000 Mennonites who had recently left their lost paradise in Soviet Russia arrived in Canada, so that there was no lack of such as were willing to take over the holdings the Old Colony left behind.

At the same time, it goes without saying that even under such favorable conditions, some substantial losses could not be avoided. For one thing, many of the refugees from Russia had little or no money, and secondly, during this time farming conditions in Canada were worsening from year to year.

However, all that was quite bearable and not to be compared with the sacrifices that had been required half a century before during the migration from Russia. During the first years after the Mennonite settlers arrived in Mexico, some eight million pesos, or half that many dollars of their money flowed into their newly adopted country.

THE ARRIVAL OF AN IMMIGRANT TRAIN IN SAN ANTONIO DE LOS ARENALES

But I was about to give a description of a typical immigrant train. A few months after the colonizing effort began in Mexico, I arrived in the year 1923 for the first time at what is today Cuauhtemoc and what was then San Antonio de los Arenales. At that time, this place was a regular Wild West station on the open prairie, bordered in the distance by the blue contours of gigantic mountain ranges. Exactly thirteen wind-swept trees – yes, indeed, I often counted them – stood around the station at the time. In addition, there were several widely scattered mud huts and a large water tank by the tracks, from which the snorting locomotives filled their bellies. Today, of course, everything looks different around this place.

And now came the great experience, when for the first time I watched the arrival of a Mennonite train from Canada, a living fragment of a dramatic resettlement story, a modern continuation of the ancient German migrations.

All day long there was excitement in the "Stadt" [town], as the Mennonites were in the habit of calling this railroad stop. Several hundreds of them were in Mexico already, having arrived on the very first trains, and they had already founded their first villages. Today they waited for another train. All around the station stood their horses and wagons, in the shade of which they made themselves comfortable, since there were but few buildings.

The train was late. The afternoon gave way to twilight and evening. As night approached, the moon came up, large and close, as it rises only out of the valley of Santa Lucia to take its course over the hill of San Antonio. Finally, around midnight, the drawn-out basses of the locomotives wailed from far away across the prairie. Bright as day, the moon shone down and illuminated the lonely hill with a mild, whitish light.

The waiting Mennonites crowded around the station. All eyes were directed eastward across the prairie, from where, tooting and wailing, approached a dark snake on glittering iron rails. And then the two locomotives that had pulled the mighty train up the hills came puffing alongside, emitting great bursts of sparks from their smokestacks, which showered down like merry fireworks. As if exhausted, the great wheels finally stopped. Steam hissed from the vents.

The first cars were passenger coaches with illuminated windows and sleepy immigrants.

Was this the end? Were they really at their destination? Was that wide, endless highland out there, looking so indescribably wild and remote in the pale moonlight, the new home which they had traded for what was so familiar in Canada?

Quickly they poured out of their compartments, streamed out over the "platform" if one were to call the open prairie that. There was much hand shaking, shouting of greetings, for many already had brothers and sisters here in Mexico.

Standing in groups now, they chatted with each other. In Low German! Low German, as at home, speaking it here now, abroad, hundred of them, on the wild prairie under the Mexican moon! Men with sailors' caps, or wide-brimmed black hats; women in long, dark dresses, caps and black shawls on their heads; girls in gray checkered skirts, their shawls white with flower embroidery. Now the journey of more than a week through parts of three enormous countries had come to an end. And with trusting hearts, these people, whose ancestors had come from the Frisian seaboard and had made the long detour over Russia and Canada, stepped out onto the soil of this strange world, doing so with the peace of the righteous, with confident, unshakeable faith that "the Lord will bring it to pass."

THE NEW HOME

At an unbelievably early hour, they set to work unloading the train. The cattle cars were opened, and cows and horses brought out, splendid round Belgian horses of a strong working breed. Wood shattered under the impact of axes; hammer blows filled the air. Wooden and wire cages with chickens and geese were unloaded. Hay wagons with wide racks were assembled and stacked high with goods. Farm implements and other machinery appeared. Heavy tractors rolled snorting down heavy planks from the freight cars. Long boards and construction timbers were stacked on axels with wheels. Rolls of barbed wire, of roofing and felt, and lengths of sheet metal were heaped on the wagons, as well as household appliances, furniture, beds.

The space beside the train looked like an army staging area. Wagging their tails and barking happily, faithful dogs brought along from Canada ran around among the piles of goods and groups of people. But everything was well organized. Children lent a proficient hand and helped their elders wherever they could. Well-trained little girls stood by wooden cradles with infants, watching over them, fulfilling their guard duty with touching earnestness.

By the afternoon, everything was ready. A long caravan of vehicles, drawn by horses and tractors, moved down the hill of San Antonio, across the small stream and out on the plain on which the new villages were to be established. For a long time, they remained in sight from our knoll, a long procession of modern Wild West pioneers who had traded the oxen that pulled the covered wagons for tractors. Finally, the last clouds of dust disappeared in the distance.

The same picture repeated itself whenever a new immigrant train arrived. They continued to come well into the year 1926, when the immigration could finally be considered completed.

THE VERY FIRST TO ARRIVE

Naturally, I have made an effort to find the list naming those whom the very first train brought as pioneers to Mexico on March 8, 1922. This list would have been an interesting document, which by rights should have been included in this book. But I looked for it without success, and even my friend, J.A. Enns, whom I have to thank for so much voluntary and invaluable assistance in putting my material together, we was unable to find the list. Hence, I am unable to pass on all the names of the first immigrants, the pathfinders and trail blazers. However, I give here the names of those of whom I am

certain: Herman Hildebrandt, Peter Krahn, Jakob Krahn, Abram Friesen, Gerhard Blatz, Jakob Friesen, Johann Buekert.

THE OLD VILLAGES ARISE NEW ON MEXICAN SOIL

Since the Old Colonists had brought with them everything they needed, not only for the cultivation of the soil, but also for the construction of needed buildings, they were able to begin immediately with the building of villages. They lost no time in laying out the wide streets down the middle of what would be the villages, in staking out the individual properties, and in erecting their houses and barns.

In the middle of this feverish activity, they paused on the first Sunday for their first worship service on Mexican soil. They held this first service of worship and thanksgiving to God in a tent, in which they congregated at the site of the village of Rosengart. The first to expound the Word of God in the new, still so strange home was the then preacher Isaac Dyck, who later became an elder. We can imagine how his words must have gripped the hearts of his listeners at that time, strengthening their souls in preparation for the tremendous work that lay ahead.

The new villages grew with astonishing speed. Where until now there had been only the lonely, untouched prairie, there soon stood the houses and farm buildings of Blumenort, Gnadenthal, Kleefeld, Rosenthal, Rosengart, Rosenfeld, Blumengart, and Schanzenfeld. Others quickly followed. Also, in the Swift Current area, one village after another rose from the soil. When I came to San Antonio in 1923, the plans for most of today's villages had already been laid, and everywhere the first farmyards already awaited new immigrants, which, as we have already noted, arrived with regularity.

THE PRAIRIE BECOMES FARMLAND

The field work, too, was promptly undertaken. The "Steppe", as the Mennonites still called the land, following their customs in Russia, was broken up. Where in this lonesome wilderness, no plow had ever cut through the soil, long furrows now appeared, growing into larger and larger expanses of cultivated ground and looking as if a giant hand had placed large patches on the monotonous prairie.

At first the Colonists farmed as they had in Canada and planted wheat. But they were greatly disappointed as one crop failure followed another; they were finally convinced that this new land was not suitable for growing wheat and that they would have to change their ideas about what to farm. They also tried to raise flax during those first years, and to an extent it did not do badly; but for this crop there was little market, and so the Colonists soon had to turn to the two main products of the country: corn and beans.

About these products they had much to learn and worry about before they knew how to go about raising them. The corn had to come from good locally acclimated seed and raising it here on the high plain of the Sierra Madre was by no means the same as in the lower southern regions. And the beans had to be carefully separated according to species, otherwise the dealers wouldn't take them, or else they offered so low a price for them that it didn't pay to harvest them. Ojo cabro, baye

rata, mantequilla, pinto, and by whatever other names the many species were called, one had to learn to know and distinguish them properly and to test their productivity. All these things could not happen overnight, and so through those first years there were great disappointments, many complaints, and much despair.

THE CLIMATE

Added to this, the Colonists had to become accustomed here to an entirely different climate from that which they had known in Canada. The sky here was extraordinarily miserly with water through most of the year, so that the drought often seemed hardly bearable. But when the rainy season came, there seemed to be no end to it. Then it would pour with such incessant force that of water there would be almost too much, so that not seldom it would literally drown out newly planted seeds. The floods would then come pouring down the hills with such force and in such great amounts that streams and riverbeds which were dry during the rest of the year became foaming, raging torrents, overflowing fields and inundating roads until they became almost impassable for days, even weeks at a time.

Thunderstorms of a violence such as the Colonists had never known rolled down from the mountains, discharging all their energy over the high valley, ever opening new sluices of pouring rain. And so, it was necessary to build drainage canals and to put up dikes so that there wouldn't be too much of the good when it finally came. To keep the roads passable, the Colonists had to dig ditches and construct bridges in the worst places.

It was something entirely new, this typically Mexican rainy season. But it was also something nice, to which the Colonists soon gladly accustomed themselves. Was there any place on earth where the heavens revealed themselves with more splendor and magnificence than they did at this time over the high valley of Bustillos? Was there a horizon anywhere from which the clouds rose more majestically – a never-ending caravan of them, edged with the gold of the sun, saturated with the most splendid hues that the human eye ever beholds? Where had anyone ever observed more glorious sunrises? And what could be more wonderful than when, after a sultry storm and cooling showers, the day came to a close in peaceful splendor and the last rays of the sun beaming over the hills in the west drenched in copper red the mighty boulder to the east that is Mount Bustillos beyond the great laguana? And what could be more pleasant than to breathe this pure, healthful, invigorating mountain air, flowing into the lungs like a healing balsam?

The whole year, so to speak, turned on the rainy season. It was the source of life. Almost overnight the brown prairie covered itself in luscious green. It was as if the Lord God touched the land with a magic wand. Suddenly everything sprouted and grew out of the earth in a gorgeous display. Flowers budded and glowed, not only in the gardens of the Colonists, but over the prairie, until it undulated like a sea of long green waves. Pretty butterflies fluttered over the dew-fresh blossoms; there was a humming of bees and wasps, and field mice grew fat on the many bugs and seeds on which it was their pleasure to feed.

And there were crickets and grasshoppers, but not the kind that had appeared in such horrendous numbers during the first years of the Old Colony settlement in Canada, where these insects had

destroyed entire crops; nor were these grasshoppers here of the same kind as those that are feared in the more southern parts of Mexico, where it was once my experience to see them attack a whole railroad train, stopping it for hours, until the crew could finally clear the rails well enough so that the train was able to move on over the millions of squishing insect bodies. The grasshoppers of San Antonio were harmless. Some which appeared to be brown and quite unremarkable when observed on the ground would unfold red and yellow wings on which to take off and buzz away like miniature airplanes.

On the fields the grain now came up so rapidly that one could almost see it grow. The beans ran into leaf, and the oats, with which the Old Colonists were achieving better and better results, now developed with as astonishing speed after what had seemed such a poor start in the first dry months. Nevertheless, it always remained shorter in the straw than it does at home in Europe.

The rainy season was also a good time for livestock, which now found rich pasture, lush grass that reached to the bellies of the animals. The contrast of the seasons was most obvious in the Mexican cattle. During the dry season, the animals grew ever thinner, and often during especially dry years, numbers of them died from lack of water and feed. During the rainy season, however, they became very noticeably round and smooth. With the Mennonites' cattle this difference was, of course, not so drastic. They were supplied with water from wells, and when there was no pasture, they were contained and fed hay or cornstalks, so that they did not become lean so quickly.

After the rainy season, the summer came to a close, giving way to a delightful autumn with a late harvest time, lasting into December. Whereas in Canada, the land had lain under snow for long months, in Mexico, snow was a rarity; when it did fall, it was greeted with thankful joy, for it supplied the moisture that made it possible for the Colonists to look forward to successful spring tillage.

However, the winters did get quite cold, even if not nearly so cold as in Canada, extending sometimes into April, even May. Although it might be warm during the day at this time, there was often frost at night, quite often ruining the fruit harvest.

Spring came with dry and sometimes very unpleasant windstorms, which, when they came, blew incessantly over the high valley. Dust devils whirled across the fields and huge clouds of dust wandered across the prairie and especially over the hill of San Antonio, which was often entirely veiled in hazy dust, from which comes the "de los Arenales," the San Antonio "of the sandhills."

The name was justified. No room in the house could be kept clean during this time. The fine sand penetrated everything, settling as dust. It gritted between the teeth, irritated the eyes, and if you had been outside for a while, you would come back in with your clothes looking as if you had just come out of a cement plant, or out from the dust behind a threshing machine.

Spring and early summer were dry and brought only occasional beneficial rain showers. Often not a drop would fall on the bone-dry land over long periods of time after winter's end, and then the early planting would suffer greatly until the rainy season came again, bringing deliverance and once more awakening life everywhere.

IT WAS A GOOD CHOICE

One thing was certain, however: As different as the seasons were in Mexico from those the Colonists had known in Canada, the climate here was healthful and so good that they were able to do all their own work themselves throughout the year. They did not need to call on outside help, on Indian peons for example, as is customary farther south, where because of the unhealthful tropical weather, Europeans are unable to do all their own work themselves.

Here the Mennonites did not need to fear the many burdensome plagues found in other areas of Mexico. There were no fever-producing swamps or tropical forests, no raging malaria fever; there were no fleas, as in Michoacan, for example, where in some places hundreds of them will cover your legs up to your knees, and you have to sleep in raised beds or in hammocks, so that the tormenting pests can't reach you. There were no scorpions here, as in Durango, no ants trekking in armies of millions straight through walls and houses if such stood in their way. And there were no grasshoppers, as already noted, darkening the sun in horrendous swarms, as they had in Canada, attacking the settlements and destroying entire plantings and crops.

Here the colonists could live. Here they could work and fight a healthy battle against honest difficulties such as beset the rural world against weeds struggling to infest the fields, against predators such as hawks waylaying barnyard fowl, or coyotes that roamed the fields at night, sometimes attacking young livestock. Such things one could deal with; they kept one's energies alert. Such things were known in other places, too, and belonged to the life on the farm.

The land, of course, left much to be desired. Also, relative to its worth, the Colonists had paid far too much for it. Many of the complaints that were heard again and again in this regard did not seem unjustified at first when one considered the productive wheat land the Colonists had left behind in Canada, or heard tell of the fertility with which the land was blessed in the southern states of Mexico.

There it was possible in some parts to plant and harvest two crops a year. There the Indio could poke a hole in the uncultivated ground, drop in two or three kernels of corn, and the seeds would come up and make crops in an abundance such as could be found hardly anywhere else. In such areas no frost kept destroying the fruit on carefully grown trees. There the trees grew unattended and bore the finest fruit, such as could only be bought with hard-earned money in the north.

But what good was all that to our Colonists? Such paradises were not created for our northern farmers. Those were no areas for colonists who were accustomed to hard work throughout the year. The heat, the hothouse air of the tropics, or the humidity of the subtropics would never have done for people from the north, who, despite all the productiveness of such an area, despite all the abundance of its vegetation, could never have been happy in such a place or have prospered there.

So the delegates had known very well what they were about when they had chosen the harsher north with its meager soil over the rich south – when they had found for their people a place in which they could live and work without slowly going slack and perhaps even coming to ruin in a land too richly blessed with a blissful climate.

Quite incidentally, the Colonists had begun in a small way to plant fruit trees in their gardens, to which they had at first attached no particular significance. In a few years, however, it became evident that fruit, especially apples, did remarkably well here. This was noted not only by the Colonists, but also by their Mexican neighbors, and so, especially during the fifties, large and eventually very large

apple orchards were planted extensively, lending the entire area a new character. Today apple production is the largest industry among landowners of the area, so that the region in which the Mennonites are located is known throughout Mexico not only as the corn granary, but also as the fruit orchard of Chihuahua.

DR. H.L. SAWATSKY

In closing this discussion briefly describing the physical aspects of the land newly settled by the Mennonites, we refer to the extensive work of Dr. H.L. Sawatsky that appeared in 1971 under the title They Sought a Country, which, among other important topics concerning farming among the Colonists, deals more extensively and from a more recent and scientific viewpoint with such things as weather conditions precipitation, temperatures, soil conditions, crop cultivation and yields, etc., than we were able to deal with them here.

,,Ziehet, ziehet, hebt...!" Fleißige Mennonitenfarmer bauen ein Haus.
Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Johan Bartsch von Blumenthal, Campo 25, Cuauhtemoc, in Jacob Wiebens Obstgarten in Quinta Lupita. Wiebe hat 25 Acker Obstbäume.
Foto: Post

Sehr bald lernten die Ansiedler, mit den landesüblichen ,,adobe" (ungebrannter Lehmziegel) zu bauen.

Foto: Karl Goetz

Schon in den ersten Jahren pflanzte man Obstbäume in den Gärten, die gut gediehen. Es war der Grundstock für die später überall angelegten Apfelpflanzungen.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Am Anfang gab es noch Bauern, die mit dem Handpflug und einem guten Gespann die Steppe aufbrachen und sie, Furche um Furche, in Ackerland verwandelten.

Foto: aus einer populären ,,Revista"

Mutter und Kinder fahren über die in der Regenzeit verschlammten Wege der Steppe.

Foto: Dr. Schafmeister

Das Viergespann zieht die Sämaschine, mit welcher der erste Hafer auf fremden Boden ausgesät wurde.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Das mit kanadischem Holz erbaute Haus von Hermann Hildebrand (rechts). Links der junge Aaron Redekop, später Großkaufmann in Cuauhtémoc.

Foto: Karl Goetz

Ein Prachtexemplar eines der von Kanada mitgebrachten Pferde, wie sie in Mexiko unbekannt waren. *Foto: A. Redekop*

Ein historisches Bild: Ankunft eines Einwandererzuges im Sommer 1923. Deutlich erkennbar sind die schweren kanadischen Pferde, eine Dreschmaschine, Traktoren, Gerätschaft, Bauholz, Säcke mit Saatgut, usw.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Auf dem Hofe des Vorstehers Gerhard J. Rempel wird soeben die Dresch-maschine aufgefahren.

Foto: F. W. Butterlin

5. The Men

ELDERS AND ADMINISTRATION

All in all, the Colony was in good hands. At that time, the elders were ABRAM WIEBE from Neuhoffnung for the Swift Current area and JOHANN J. FRIESEN from Neuenburg for the Manitoba area. Friesen was a devout, kind-hearted and without a doubt also very capable man, with the end of whose life later, the Colony suffered a great loss. The two administrators were ABRAM J. NEUDORF from Rosenfeld for Manitoba and CORNELIUS WOLF from Neuhoffnung for Swift Current. Both men offered all their time and energy to the service of what was at the time no easy position. One can only say that they became gray honorably as they faithfully accomplished their duties as conscientious servants of their people as long as they were in office.

So many times, dozens of times, a hundred times, I sat counselling with these men over one thing or another. We worked together on innumerable documents, composing, translating, recording. We went before administrative authorities, starting with the municipal president, and then by way of tax bureaus and law courts on up as far as the state governor. Again and again, difficult and sometimes easy situations had to be resolved, matters that were sometimes quickly settled and sometimes very time consuming. The problems frequently seemed to be endless and became very discouraging, but ultimately, they were always solved. For these men, the well-being of the whole, the collective best interest of the Colony, was always in the foreground, and for it they conscientiously sacrificed their own comfort, their time, their peace of mind, yes, even their health. For one thing was certain: Easy that first period was not.

It was, rather, an endless, grinding struggle that had to be kept up almost without interruption and with all available energy before things slowly began to settle down and smooth out. It is the accomplishment of these men to have carried on this difficult struggle in such a manner that the majority of the Colonists were little or not at all aware of it and were able to go about their work without being kept in a constant state of turmoil. The average Colonist was for the most part aware of problems only when he himself had something about which to complain It was then up to the mayor or the administrator or the elder to set things right, and if that didn't happen quickly enough, there was often great dissatisfaction.

On the whole I feel that adequate thanks for self-sacrificing efforts is still owing to those men who led the events of the Colony so faithfully during the difficult beginnings of its settlement in Mexico. Even though these men did not serve to gain great reward, let us remember the injunction, "Honor to whom honor is due." These men certainly earned not to be forgotten, to live on in the memory of our settler folk, who owe an immense debt to their leaders' personal efforts during that difficult and restless period.

Among the men we have named above belong a substantial number of others: FRANZ FROESE, for example, red-haired and in appearance more Irish than German, quiet, but possessing a good head with which he helped the Colony to think, JOHANN W. REMPEL, father of my good friend, Gerhard J. Rempel, who himself served as administrator for twelve years as successor to A.J. Neudorf. Although both of these men were not with the earliest groups, they, nevertheless, helped to bear a goodly portion of the burden during the earlier years.

THE WAISENAMT

The Waisenamt was always among the first of the Colony's institutions that could be depended upon when it came to solving difficult problems. Its first administrators on Mexican soil were JAKOB PETERS and JOHANN WIEBE. My friend, Peters, who at first lived in Neuhorst, always helped along dependably to the best of his abilities in this large undertaking. Among us Germans in San Antonio, we never called him anything but "gentle Heinrich." We all got along well with him. He always seemed good tempered and had a smile for everyone. Well, admittedly, he could also be otherwise! But we all liked him, and when, many years later, he was shot and killed by bandits during a hold-up of P.H. Peter's store in Burwalde, the San Antonio Germans regretted his tragic end, which was so entirely unsuited to "gentle Heinrich," just as deeply as did his fellow believers. His friendly face was now gone forever.

FAITHFUL SERVANTS OF THE COLONY

HERMANN HARMS, ever in good spirits and at that time inseparable from A.J. Neudorf, whose company he was often seen driving cross-country in the same "buggy", was the first manager of fire insurance. Among the first was also the already mentioned ISAAC DYCK, serving as preacher at the time and later as the successor to the position held by Johann J. Friesen. I recall also preacher, JULIUS LOEWEN, from Hamburg, Village No. 3, as fellow worker in the undertakings of the Colony, and it was always a pleasure later, whenever my way took me through the villages, to be able to greet him, robust as always in the midst of his family, now grown to a considerable number.

And then, of course, there were the ENNS BROTHERS, of whom BERNHARD was for a time active as the assistant administrator of the Waisenamt before he and his brother became involved in significant private undertakings that finally made it possible for the Colony to have its own printing press. Later this press became the property of Gerhard J. Rempel, Blumenort No. 22. On it were printed Bibles, songbooks, primers for school children, and many other things for the use of the Colony, including also, in 1948, the first edition of this book, titled, *Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott*. [A Mighty Fortress is Our God.]

UNOFFICIAL ASSISTANTS AND EXPIDITERS

But also, among members of the Colony who had no official position there were men who earned its merit, as for example, my friend, P.H. Peters, from Burwalde, who because of his extensive knowledge and especially experience in business matters and his wide association with people was able to accomplish a great deal, and always offered his services whenever they were needed. And like him, there were many others whose names would have to be recorded here if doing so wouldn't go beyond the scope of this book.

KLAAS HEIDE

Towering above the rest was the personality of a man with whom we already became acquainted in Canada among the first delegates that investigated Mexico, a man, who in my opinion has not received nearly enough recognition, namely, KLAAS HEIDE.

This man never held another position after completing his mission as a delegate to Mexico. He was never a mayor or a preacher or an administrator or even an elder. And yet there were times when everything turned on him. He stood, even if often invisibly, at the center of all events, determining what was to be done. And that was all right, for what Klaas Heide thought and said was never a shot in the dark; it was right and to the point. No one who knew him or had anything to do with him could ignore the towering impression he made, or, eventually, escape his influence. We have here a type of natural leader, whom the Colony was fortunate to have as it began the new phase of its history in Mexico.

Klaas Heide was slender, almost gaunt; he had a finely chiselled, expressive, intelligent face and looked more like a man of learning than like a farmer. Many of the Colonists, especially those among the poorer ones, considered him arrogant, all the more because he was wealthy. And when he spoke, his voice sounded like that of someone in charge, in charge of his own house, his Colony. And yet, he was friendly and affable. To strangers he could speak with such convincing amiability that they could not refuse him anything, and many considered it an honor to be able to do him a favor.

The advantage that the Colony gained from this was, of course, invaluable. Often without saying a word, he would take into his own hands matters concerning the Colony, and only when they were resolved, would he bring them up before his brethren. Usually a few convincing, or when necessary, a few terse, sharp words would then suffice to lay the matter to rest. Someone else would likely have fared badly doing this, but with Klaas Heide it was something else. He was right. Friend and foe knew this. His superior judgment rendered every contradiction trivial and ludicrous.

Even in the negotiations with Mexican authorities in which Klaas Heide participated, it was invariably quite easy to achieve what was desired, although he spoke no Spanish. Often when helping

only as an interpreter, I could nevertheless observe how his clear and precise manner, above all his unquestionably distinguished and self-assured personality, which knew at the same time how to express itself discreetly and amiably, invariably made a strong, unavoidable impression that brought out a feeling of co-operation, even among those from whom one might have expected at first something entirely different. Wherever Klaas Heide went, he received the treatment of a gentleman because he knew how to present himself as one. When he died in October of 1926, the Colony lost a leader such as it has not had since.

I will never forget our last meeting, which took place a few days before he died. My old friend, Walter Peters, a man of Mennonite origin from the Danzig area, my wife, and I had gone to Blumenort to visit him on his sickbed. But a man like Klaas Heide does not lie in bed. Thin and looking even more emaciated than usual because of his illness, he had dressed himself and lay stretched out on a hard bench in the living room. His wife, her eyes wet with tears, invited us to come in, but she, herself, stayed outside the room. Very few visitors were being admitted. With difficulty, yet energetically, and despite our protests, our sick friend raised himself up into a sitting position as if nothing were amiss, and with that cordiality that had gained him so many friends, he said,

"How nice of you to visit me in my illness one more time."

Not realizing how seriously ill he was, we assured him that we hoped to come many more times to visit him. My wife placed a few fresh flowers in a water glass on the corner table, and he, who had been very fond of her from the beginning of what was still our very young marriage, and even before then when he had known her as my wife to be, nodded gratefully and said,

"Good girl…!"

Then it was quiet in the room, very quiet, and suddenly several tears coursed down his sunken cheeks. Now all three of us visitors had a feeling that his condition was perhaps more serious than we had thought at first. My wife said very softly,

"Uncle Heide, shouldn't we have someone get a doctor for you from Chihuahua?"

But with that, he was his old self again. In all friendliness, but with certainty, he answered,

"My dear child, no doctor can help me anymore. My clock has run down."

His words struck us like a blow. We were unwilling to believe him. It couldn't be that bad. Nor was Klaas Heide nearly old enough yet for this. What then could be wrong with him that wasn't curable? This man, sitting there on the bench opposite us, a bit thin, somewhat emaciated, but with an expression as friendly, as open and lively as ever – he was speaking of his early demise as if it were a decided issue. It couldn't be!

"Yes, my friends, it has to be," he said. "For all of us there comes a time when the Lord God calls us away. And, believe me, that time has come for me. And it is all right so. I am ready, too. And yet…And yet…"

"What is it, Uncle Heide?"

"My people. I am not concerned about family matters. Those are taken care of. But I am afraid for my people."

That was all he said at the moment. Nor did we venture to ask anything more. And finally, he added,

"But why am I anxious? There is a Greater One. He will not suffer our foot to be moved. He that keeps us will neither slumber nor sleep."

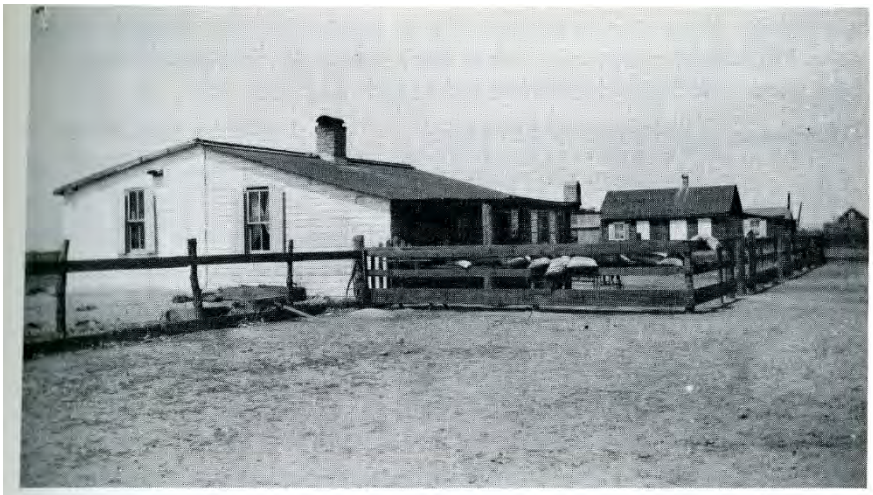
It was time for us to go, and we got up from our chairs; we could see that he was tiring.

Once more all his old cordiality lit up his eyes as he reached out and shook each of us by the hand and said his farewell.

Those were the last words we heard from him. A few days later, Klaas Heide was borne to his grave.

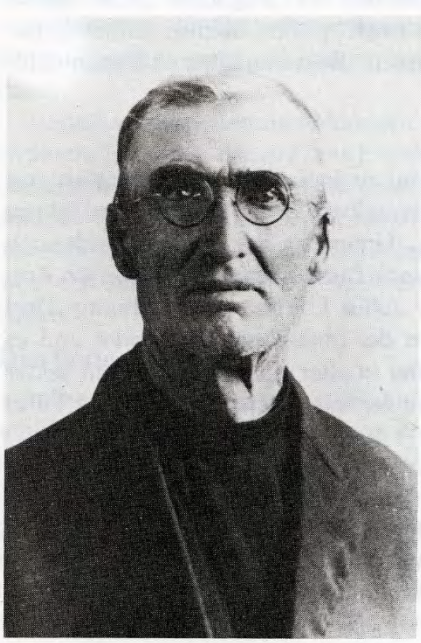
Der Vorsteher Gerhard J. Rempel im Gespräch mit dem deutschen Konsul in Chihuahua, im Jahre 1938.

Foto: F. W. Butterlin



In diesem Hause in Neuhorst, Campo 13 wohnte Jacob J. Peters, der als Mitverwalter des Waisenamtes nach Mexiko kam. Unser Freund wurde im Jahre 1934 von Banditen erschossen, als diese den Kaufladen von P. H. Peters in Burwalde, Campo 107 überfielen.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus



Klaas P. Heide, geb. in Rußland 14. März 1859, gest. in Mexiko 18. Oktober 1926 — einer der bedeutendsten Männer bei der Landsuche und Umsiedlung der Altkolonie von Kanada nach Mexiko.

Foto: K. J. Heide

6. SAN ANTONIO DE LOS ARENALES

THE LANDSCAPE

In my description of the first Mennonite train, I saw arriving at what was then San Antonio de los Arenales, we glanced briefly at this place, which today is known as Cuauhtemoc. It is now an economic center that serves not only the Mennonite villages, but also a considerable number of smaller places in these very spacious surroundings. Here, far abroad, everything seems to become enormous, even gigantic: the mountains, the valleys, the roads with no end, the great distances between places.

STRATEGIC LOCATION

Today Cuauhtemoc may be said to be the most important place in all of the Sierra within the state of Chihuahua. At 6500 feet above sea level, it lies pushed over toward the west above the valley of Bustillos, where it seems as if the immense landscape is taking one last deep breath before lifting itself up into the actual, steeply rising Sierra Madre, consisting of colossal mountain masses, abyssal gorges, and immense jagged boulders.

One can see the decidedly strategic location of Cuauhtemoc most clearly when standing on top of the hill just beyond the last houses at the south end of the city and letting one's glance sweep east, north, and west.

From here there is an overview of an enormous area, hemmed in only by mountains, which are closer on the left than they are straight ahead and to the right, where they rise from a more distant horizon. And it was for purely strategic reasons that San Antonio was established on this particular hill. From here the cowboys working for the rich landowners could observe their herds for miles around. And when at the end of the last century, the Northwest Railroad was laid across and beyond this hill, that is to say, across its lower portion, the first and for many years the only mud huts appeared here to constitute the San Antonio that the Colonists found at their arrival. With the coming of the railroad, San Antonio became a cowboy and Wild West station, remaining such until the Colonists arrived.

FORMER CATTLE WEALTH

The only use to which these giant landholdings had been put earlier, during the era of Porfirio Diaz, was cattle raising. In fact, Chihuahua was for a long time known not only as a mining state, but also, above all, as a cattle raising and cattle exporting state. It is said of old General Terrasas, best known and richest among one-time large landowners, that he once received a telegram from a Chicago packing plant asking whether he could deliver ten thousand steers of a specific age, whereupon he is said to have laconically wired back, "Of what color?"

The great cattle wealth, as most other forms of agricultural wealth, disappeared completely with the revolution that lasted generally from 1910 to 1920, but which extended its influence for many more

years. Not until recently did the area come alive again with cattle. The Mennonites, too, have increased their cattle production in conjunction with their traditional crop cultivation. But when they arrived in 1922, the cattle production of the entire area wasn't worth mentioning. The land lay waste and deserted, and the only reminder of herds that had once grazed here were bleached cattle bones scattered here and there over the prairie, on which coyotes had at one time gnawed at night.

THE PUNITIVE EXPEDITION OF 1916

San Antonio became more widely known even in an historical sense, half a dozen years before the arrival of the Old Colonists, when in 1916, the USA sent its "punitive expedition" into Mexico to capture Pancho Villa, who had in vengeful defiance attacked the border town of Columbus, Texas, and set part of it on fire. The expedition finally had to leave without accomplishing its objective. Even among Villa's countrymen, who knew this area, the people, and the hiding places in the Sierra, no one had succeeded in capturing him. Much less could anyone he expected to do so who did not know the country, even though he might come charging into it with a modern military force of considerable size.

For a time, the troops belonging to this expeditionary force were stationed at San Antonio. Their commander was General Pershing, who shortly after these field exercises would be leading the American troops in World War I. San Antonio was, of course, too small to accommodate a military force, so the troops put up their own tents and quarters, not on top of the hill, as could have been expected for strategic purposes, but at the foot of it, where a small stream offered water for the horses and field kitchens. Nor did it seem to occur to anyone that it could come to an encounter with Pancho Villa in these wide-open spaces, as would ordinarily have seemed likely. But the centaur was in flight. He had been shot in the leg in the battle of Guerrero, a few kilometers west of San Antonio, and like an animal shot in the belly, he kept himself hidden in the Sierra, waiting for his painful wound to heal.

GENERAL JOHN J. PERSHING'S QUARTERS

General Pershing had also set up his general headquarters below, in the railroad's small pump house. When I came to San Antonio seven years later, it was the only one of the few adobe huts in the area that still bore the white coat of paint which the American soldiers had given it when their general was quartered there. Since the tent city had disappeared with the troops, this white building was the only thing worth seeing of what was left from that time, that is, if one chose to disregard a number of boys and girls with unlikely blond hair and blue eyes that showed up as time went on.

WHAT SAN ANTONIO LOOKED LIKE

The only vegetation at San Antonio, as we already learned with the description of the arrival of a Mennonite train, consisted of thirteen trees with which a sentimental station master had endeavored to beautify his lonely place of work on the bare hill, and which his successors, or else the few families of section hands who were housed hereabouts, had faithfully continued to water. Next to the station stood

the huge water tank into which water was pumped up from the little "Pershing house" below and stored for the locomotives.

Across from the station, where the large La Mercantil department store was later located, stood a gigantic adobe structure, weirdly charming in its half-dilapidated condition, looking down into the valley like a mighty, but soberly unadorned castle ruin. Actually, it consisted of nothing but four immense walls without windows, but with gaps and openings for light, and a roof overhead. Many years ago, cattle had been corralled here before being loaded on railroad cars across the way. The building had also been used to store grain. For an adobe structure it was of enormous height and so spacious that a traveling circus had one put on its show inside. The huge building, visible from great distances, served as a landmark of a region in which cattle raising was dominant at one time.

This structure was not torn down until years later. Newer building replaced it, and where this old landmark had stood, a new one arose, one that no longer symbolized the former cattle industry, but rather a new era of field cultivation and grain production.

THE FIRST BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENTS

Aaron Redekop, a man with an enterprising, trail-blazing spirit, had a large grain silo erected here with the help of the well-known and well-liked master carpenter, Jakob Renpenning. For years this high wooden structure towered over the skyline of Cuauhtemoc.

But since everything in this world is subject to eternal change and constant renewal, so also this structure, at that time greatly admired, eventually became a victim of progress when it had to give way to the giant new grain silo constructed of concrete and steel which today has taken over the role of the former wooden structure.

Then there was the large, four-cornered block of the old Hacienda building with its dismal apartments that had once been occupied by herdsmen and their families, but which now had other tenants, who put it to other uses. The command post of the small cavalry unit assigned to San Antonio for the protection of an area with a surrounding radius of more than a hundred miles was located here. Also found here were the post office, the state police headquarters, as well as several administrative offices that made of the Seccion Municipal, also a smoke-filled fonda [a restaurant]. Except for a few other, more or less undefinable establishments, that was just about it.

What was then and for some time to come the best building, the elongated house of Belisario Chavez, was divided into numerous areas and served many purposes. On the left side around the corner was the only local bakery, whose bread we were obliged to eat whether fresh or stale, or not at all whenever the baker was drunk. Three rooms in the left front of the building were occupied by the David S. Russek & Co. banking firm. Adjacent was a room occupied by the Chavez family, connected to which was the telephone office. Next came the "hotel" of our countryman Jakob Jansen from Cologne, nicknamed "Enni" by his wife, both of them very competent and – like the rest of us – trying to grasp by the hairs here in San Antonio the good fortune that was bound to come.

Then came something undefinable, where, for one thing, it was possible to buy potatoes, for another, old iron and utensils, and where sometimes cars were repaired, and other things sometimes took place. Next came the premises where the former Prussian non-commissioned officer, Hans Lauke, who was later murdered near Parral, had opened a butcher shop. Last of all came Pedro Quesada's bar, where also the Colonists did not mind stopping by now and then to enjoy a small Kohm.

Then there was something in San Antonio that no one would have expected at this Wild West station, namely, a regular railroad restaurant, one that had its limitations, of course, and had always to be appreciated with the necessary criterion of relativity; but it was there, nevertheless, and was managed not at all badly by a hardy Chinese named Fong Ang, who was assisted by an additional staff of his countrymen. It was possible to get something to eat here, cheaply, even, and in abundance. True, the "menu" wasn't new everyday; in fact, remained the same day in and day out, year in and year out; yet these Chinese were, nevertheless, a true blessing to travelers coming through, as well as to the Colonists when they came to town, and also to many of us local residents, for it was possible to come here to a large dining room with large folding doors and to sit at long linen-covered tables to be served food and drink at any time of day or night. I was first directed to this place by an old friend, the station agent at the time, Benito Nunez.

THE BANKS

The banks that were among the first business establishments presented a rather peculiar situation. From the very beginning there were two of them, whereas in other often larger and older Mexican localities, banks were often unknown. They came to San Antonio because of the modern wind which, ironically, blew over the land with the coming of none other than the Mennonites, who, from many points of view were, paradoxically, anything but modern. But to banks, to making deposits and to writing checks they were accustomed, and it would have been most impractical for them to take their cash, which in the form of dollar bills often thicken the wallets in their breast pockets to the size of a fist, along with them on the prairie.

And so, the Russek firm immediately sent out an officer, who later was for a time my superior, Robert Karl, to set up a branch officer in San Antonio and open a banking business there. At the same time another banking establishment came into existence, P.E. Melendez & Cia, a company which originally had no intention of starting a bank but was actually pushed into doing so by the Mennonites. At first my friend and later boss, Don Balthazar Melendez, had only intended to help the Mennonites in exchanging their dollars for Mexican money and had for that purpose provided himself with a few sacks containing several thousand pesos in silver. Hardly before he could turn a hand the money was gone, and he had to get more. The Mennonites wouldn't think of carrying all that money around with them and insisted on leaving it with the Melendez firm, where they could draw it as needed, and in this way established their first credit. This required the keeping of records, for which an office had to be organized, and so a regular banking procedure eventually came into being.

As far as I know, Jakob Wiebe, a son of J.F. Wiebe, who had been involved with the Colony's land purchase, was the first bank employee with the Melendez firm. When I arrived in San Antonio, he was already in the process of becoming independent, and in doing so he established a third bank, which however, was soon only a second one, since by December of 1923, the Russek bank had already failed.

Jakob Wiebe and his wife, at that time a charming young woman, both long since deceased, can only be counted among the very first of the San Antonio pioneers without whom the place would be unimaginable and without whom its history would not be a true history. Mrs. Wiebe, quiet, gentle, and at that time very pretty, made such an improbable impression in the environment of adobe huts, the Colonists, Mexican Rancheros, Wild West banks, and village taverns that it took a while to become accustomed to the marvel that she was.

It was as if this woman had stepped down from an oil painting by a French master, and she doubtlessly was a descendent of the French element in the Canadian populace. How this elegant little person, with her expressive delicate features, her soft, dark hair to which her violet blue eyes were such a contrast happened to wind up on the bare hill of San Antonio is unfathomable. But then no mortal has ever succeeded in explaining the threads of fate which the Norns spin mysteriously for everyone. At any rate, the Wiebes were there from the beginning, and by way of many ups and downs, through thick and thin, good and bad, they became interwoven with the history of the Colony and founding years of San Antonio.

Besides the banks, many other businesses and businesspeople appeared in San Antonio as soon as the Colonists arrived, all drawn like moths by the gleam of the dollar bills from the well-filled pockets of the Mennonite settlers. Many of these entrepreneurs soon burned their fingers and disappeared from the scene. But a substantial number of others stayed in business, and of these there are today quite a few who have seen their small beginnings grow and eventually become eminent business establishments.

Some undertakings lost out, however, after the initial needs of the Mennonite settlers had been met, for example a large lumber business, the Rio Grande Lumber Co., which at first was unable to supply enough boards and planks for the settlers. Having been accustomed in Canada to building with wood, the Colonists continued to use this material to construct their buildings in Mexico, of which many are still standing today. Eventually, however, they accustomed themselves little by little to the building material common to the country, the adobe block, an unburnt, sun-dried brick made of earth, which they found to be cheaper and more practical than wood and at the same time very durable, imperishable, in fact, if correctly made. This material also had the advantage of keeping a house cool in the summer and warm in the winter when the cold wind whistled across the land. For a long time almost all of the Colonists' construction was out of adobe, until later, when they went over to other materials, such as the firebrick and especially the concrete block.

Since construction with wood became a thing of the past, the Rio Lumber Co. was no longer a paying proposition; and, when, added to this, the whole complex was destroyed by a colossal fire, it was not rebuilt.

I didn't happen to be in town when the fire broke out, but later I was told of a humorous incident connected with it. "Enni" Jansen, the proprietor of the German "hotel", who was a sort of all-around fellow, was also a painter; shortly before the fire he had been commissioned to paint a large sign on the firm's building. He wasn't quite finished when the fire broke out, but since he wouldn't be paid unless he finished the job, "Enni" is said to have kept his ladder steadfastly in place as he quickly finished the sign while everything below him was already in flames. He was able to submit his bill in full, and he was actually paid, even though everything now lay in soot and ashes.

PIONEERS AND PECULIAR ECCENTRICS

As a result of that fire, we San Antonio pioneers soon lost one of our best friends, Peter Block, an American Mennonite from Kansas, who later went to South America, and upon returning to Mexico, remained active with a mining firm farther south.

Inseparably associated with the earliest years in San Antonio are also the brothers Cardon, Mormons from the old colony of Dublan, farther west on the Northwest Railroad, who sold gasoline, cars,

and tractors. Then there was the branch establishment of Krakauer-Zork Co. from Chihuahua, directed by J.L. Mitchell, in which also our countrymen Paul Rothe from Chihuahua was active.

One after another, the Melendez brothers, Jose L. Portillo, the Chinese Alfonso Fong, and others, set up shop, employing many of us Germans, since business with the Mennonites would have been impossible without us. And so, a small group of Germans from all over the world came together in San Antonio. We built the bridge from the town to the Colony that served as a link between the Mennonites and the Mexicans and foreign business firms. Eventually we also assisted the Colonists in their dealings with the authorities and in whatever else might come up.

Among these Germans were a goodly number of competent people, but there were also some strange eccentrics among us, such as Ernst Bossneck with his long mustache, who fell asleep every evening on his chair in the "hotel" Jansen over his beer glass; or the remarkable "Dr." De Berky, who "made it" for a while in the healing arts and the sale of medicines; or a man named Richter, who played a short guest role in San Antonio, spending his days sweeping up and weighing pepper sacks in the store where he worked, but then, in the evening pinching his monocle in his squinting eye and belabouring the out-of-tune piano in the village bar, saying of himself that he was an impoverished nobleman; or our good friend Gustav Rempel, the man who at one time worked in the "Ministry of Berlin," and whose strongest language consisted of the word "Plusquamperfektum!" [Translator's note: "Plusquamperfektum" is the German word for the grammatical term pluperfect. The word contains some heavy "full-mouth" sounds but has of itself no obscene or profane connotations.]

One whose omission from the list of pioneers would be unthinkable is Carlos Schroeder, formerly with the notable firm of Ketelsen and Degetau; so also, Peter Degetau of this firm, who also spent some time among us. And then, coming later, after the first years of the colonizing effort, but nevertheless still pioneers in the truest sense of the word, are the David Redekop and Jakob Renpenning families, Friederich Rothe and Gerhard Schulz, and other Russian Germans who played an important role in the establishment and continuing development of today's Cuauhtemoc.

It would be impossible to name here all those of importance and to give them their just due.

WALTER PETERS AND ABRAM GOERZEN

Early in 1925, Walter Peters arrived on the "sand hills," and in December of the same year came Abram Goerzen. Both worked in the Melendez enterprises, supplying the Colonists with agricultural machinery and lumber. Goerzen's appearance in our German circle came about through romantic and dramatic circumstances.

It was cold that winter. The icy wind whistled around the house. Outside the snow lay foot-deep, a rarity in these regions. Inside we were warm and comfortable. A friendly fire blazed in our small round cast iron stove, into which from time to time my friend Peters shoved another chunk of wood. As so often on such unfriendly winter evenings, we two sat by our dim lamplight and read to each other from The White Gods, by Stucken, that fantastic, monumental work about the Spanish conquest of Mexico. We were smoking a good quality tobacco, and between us within reach stood a bottle of wine.

There was a knock at the door. What could it be at such a late hour? Outside stood young David Redekopp, with him a stranger, whom he introduced briefly and then took abrupt leave. And now the stranger, Abram Goerzen, stood with us in the room, a large man with bright, trusting eyes, and a long

blond mustache. He wore a light summer coat and thin oxfords. The brim of his hat was turned up venturesomely.

Without further ado, he laid some papers and brochures on the table and abruptly asked,

"Do you want to buy cream separators?"

"For God's sake! What would we do with a cream separator? All the livestock we possess consists of half a dozen chickens and about as many pigeons. They don't give milk."

Goerzen was on his last legs. His family was stuck with other Germans from Russia in Irapuato, where they had suffered ruin. With his last bit of cash, he had risked a trip north, wagering everything on this one card. Now he had nothing left except one last five-dollar bill. That was how he had come to San Antonio, and that – whether by coincidence or the work of Providence – was how he now sat here at our table, glad to warm himself at our stove and on our wine. All he had left after his flight from Russia and the unsuccessful attempt to find a home in Mexico was the papers, he had laid on our table, identifying him as an agent for a German cream separator factory. To his disadvantage these papers were for the moment only papers, which couldn't be eaten, and which could not be turned into money until he had succeeded in selling the separators to the farmers in the area.

But Abram Goerzen had brought something with him that was worth more than a cream separator agency, and that was a notably enterprising spirit which was something to see, a desire to live and get ahead that nothing could inhibit. My friend Peters and I were both of the opinion that Goerzen was the sort of man who belonged here in Cuauhtemoc.

It just so happened that a few days before, I had been offered an agency to sell fruit trees and grape vines. Until now I had made no use of this offer, and so I remarked,

"Perhaps the separators can be discussed later. But if in the meanwhile, you'd like to sell fruit trees, we could get together."

Goerzen was happy to begin immediately. Then and there we immersed ourselves in fruit tree catalogs and drew up a plan of work. All three of us went into this small but profitable business together, through which the Colony came by its first grape arbors and fruit trees, some of which are still in production today. And what Abram Goerzen came by was a new foothold on life.

We did not part until very late that night, and we had founded a friendship which, outlasting many a trial, has held all these years.

Our new friend had too much pride to take anything from us. Without delay he went to work. In this thin summer shoes, he trudged through the snow, and whether on foot or by vehicle, he betook himself from village to village, visiting farmyard after farmyard, to come back eventually with a sheaf of orders in his briefcase and a goodly sum of money in his pocket, getting our business started and putting an end to his worries. His family was able to follow him, and later, when we were also able to sell those cream separators and to arrange a position for him with Melendez and Company, there began a period of three good years which we shared with Goerzen, after which fate sent us in different directions, at least physically.

THE BROTHERS HEIMPEL

Late in 1923 the brothers Leo and Ludwig Heimpel arrived in San Antonio. In some corner somewhere, these indefatigable Schwabians rented a room, divided it with canvas into a shop on one side and private living quarters on the other, then rolled up their sleeves and went to work. Their tiny capital

certainly couldn't have amounted to more than a few hundred pesos, just enough to buy a small wagon and a horse, with a bit left over for dry goods and small useful articles that could be sold out in the villages. Despite his wooden leg, Leo got on his wagon and drove from village to village, from yard to yard, selling and trading his goods and not slacking off until he was able to develop his very modest beginnings into a fine business with large assets.

Those were pioneers who fought their way through and worked themselves up as but few are able to do and who, beyond that, had a feeling for their surroundings among the Mexicans and an understanding for the Colonists, helping and supporting them in whatever way they could. When Leo Heimpel, after years of hard but successful work, died much too soon for his age and remaining energies, it wasn't just that Cuauhtemoc lost a very useful citizen, but the Colony, as well, lost its greatest helper, and the German element in Chihuahua an honest friend and fellow countryman who will always be remembered with respect.

And, although we would have to extend this chapter considerably to claim completeness for it, we will end it here, so as to avoid getting too far off our actual subject.

Das Geschäft von P. E. Melendéz & Cia. verkaufte 1925 die ersten Dreschmaschinen an die Altkolonier. Vorn ganz rechts Walter Peters, neben ihm (Mitte) der Vertreter der International Harvester Co., Mr. William Orlebecke.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

In dem Ladengeschäft des erfolgreichen Großunternehmers Aaron Redekop in Cuauhtémoc fehlte es nie an mennonitischer Kundschaft, die dort gern und gut einkaufte.

Foto: Ken Hiebert

Weiße Wolken wandern über herbstliches Land — und über das Anwesen von J. W. Dyck in Blumenort, Campo 22.

Foto: F. W. Butterlin

7. The Agrarians

The so-called "agrarian" movement is a great social problem that has occupied the attention of the Mexican republic for many decades. The concept of agrarianism was one of the main points written on the banners of the ten-year revolution and was clearly the only deep-seated reason why, for example, a man such as the well-known and greatly feared general of the revolution, Zapata, reached for his weapon and rose up against the ruling class.

"THE LAND BELONGS TO HIM WHO CULTIVATES IT"

Zapata coined the motto: "The land belongs to him who cultivates it." Despite Mexico's independence, which had already been a reality for a hundred years, despite countless revolutions and endless political feuds, despite even such a significant reformer as Don Benito Juarez, the country, in its basic character and its division of goods, remained mired in the old feudal system that was anchored in the more than three hundred years of colonial rule. Porfirio Diaz, the iron president of Mexico, provided the country with thirty productive years of complete calm and saw to it that this period of peace was in every way progressive; however, at the same time he firmed up the privileges existing in the old economic system, which in effect consisted of only two classes of people standing sharply at opposites: the very rich and the very poor. The healthy broad layer of the middle class, on which a country customarily depends for the most part for its maintenance, was almost entirely missing. That under such circumstances an overwhelming majority could only consist of the poor is self-evident.

THE VERY RICH AND THE VERY POOR

And so, ownership, especially land ownership, was concentrated in the hands of a few, while by far the larger proportion of the population had nothing at all and was forced to do peon duty. A state such as Chihuahua, half the size of the German empire before World War I, was owned by a small group of families that could be counted on ten fingers, while the rest of the population consisted of cowherds and peons whose position hardly differed from that of serfs in Europe before serfdom there was abolished, in Prussia, for example, over a hundred years ago through the efforts of Baron zum Stein.

SOCIAL UPHEAVAL

The Mexicans were by no means still living on the moon, and the breath of modern times, which had made itself known over much of the world through mighty social movements, could not be kept away from Mexico forever. Here, too, social upheaval had to come sooner or later, and it did come in 1910, when Francisco I. Madero interrupted the thirty years of Porfirio Diaz's peaceful administration and introduced the great revolution which belongs to the bloodiest and most dramatic in the history of the world and which was intended to bring the suppressed peoples of Mexico a better and more just future.

To what extent this has been accomplished by way of this unparalleled and through the years greatly muddled revolution remains uncertain. At any rate, the social upheaval begun in 1910 has by no means come to an end. Mexico is still in the middle of the revolutionary process and is still struggling for its reorganization. The last years, especially, have brought an abundance of experiments and endeavors that show this very clearly, allowing for a ray of hope that after many digressions and mistakes, the right way sought by honest men for the people will eventually be found. "Prove all things and hold fast to that which is good!" If efforts will be made according to this advice, the day will come also for Mexico when the original ideals of Francisco Madero and his comrades in arms can become a reality.

RADICAL LAND DIVISION

Immediately after the revolution, beginnings were made in all possible ways to put the agrarian movement into practice. Those who had heretofore been peons were now to be given the land which they had formerly worked for their masters. Thousands of soldiers who had fought in the revolution were to be returned to peaceful and useful activities and settled in communal villages after their long and unstable life as troopers.

At first this was undertaken in the most radical manner. Large landowners were indiscriminately dispossessed, and wherever a group of "agrarians," as the farmers who had achieved their revolutionary status were officially named from now on, had picked out a nice piece of land, they moved on it without spending a long time consulting the government, or, for that matter, the original owner. Once they were settled on the land, the often very lengthy procedure to accomplish what the farmers' general had proclaimed, namely, that "The land belongs to him who cultivates it," would take its course. And although often enough there wasn't even any talk about any actual productive cultivation, since the agrarians lacked all the things that would have made cultivation possible, such as the necessary know-how, tools, work animals, and seed, the land, once it had been occupied, could not be taken away from the one who occupied it, because another important paragraph in the agrarian law provided that mere occupation for possession guaranteed the right of actual ownership.

One can imagine the chaos and the resulting problems such circumstances left to be straightened out everywhere in the country before even just a partial order could be established to deal with them. After some bad starts, however, it seems today that the agrarian reform will go through and slowly become reality. Conditions have become more settled, and here, too the old axiom will be found true, that where there is a will, there is also a way; for we must not forget that in spite of all the mistakes, the fundamental concept of agrarianism represents on the whole a just demand, the demand to give back to the Indian a share of the land which, in fact belongs to him, as well as to raise the very poor to a level that will incorporate them in human society, and to improve in general the living standard of the suppressed masses.

The division of the land has in the meantime become better regulated, and also the former large landowners have again been provided with some rights, in that certain holdings which are actually farmed intensively and kept in production are exempt from further dispossession. There has even been an addition to the agrarian law of a clause that renders "untouchable' large complexes of land, exempting them from division so long as they are being used in ways that benefit the total economy, as, for example, such lands as are used for the cattle and sheep ranching which is extant again today.

THE LAND OF THE MENNONITES IS CONTESTED

But those are more recent developments. The time with which we are concerned with respect to the Mennonites is an earlier, more violent period of the agrarian movement, when everywhere the pistol still hung loose from the belt. At that time the Colonists experienced something that they had never before come across anywhere in the world – that someone suddenly disputed their ownership of their land and their right to occupy and cultivate it in peace.

It was self-evident that the Mennonites had acquired their land in Mexico with the clear provision that it was actually available to them and free of any kind of encumbrances or outside claims. And so what happened came as their first great disappointment in Mexico, when it turned out that agrarians had settled themselves not only all around their land, but in many instances on it, and that they now had no intention of leaving it. A look at a map of the Colony on which the one-time settlements of the agrarians are specifically marked, clearly shows the danger and at the same time the difficulty of the situation as it existed then. To the south and west were the agrarian settlements of Chocachic and Napavechic, and in the middle those of Ojo Caliente and Rubio; in the east were those of El Muerto and El Gato, and in the north El Moyote and La Quemada, so that the entire Mennonite area was surrounded and interspersed by these settlements.

The difficulty of the situation was not fully realized at the beginning, since at first the number of Colonists was rather small and not all the land was needed. They comforted themselves with the thought that the agrarians would vacate what was their land as soon as they needed it. Too, the representatives of those who had sold them the land kept assuring them that everything would be straightened out in short order – that other land had already been made available to the agrarians in question. What they did not reveal to the Mennonites for a long time was that the agrarians were not satisfied with the new land offered to them because it was said to be less fertile. Then, too, these people simply didn't have the means by which to move, and so they refused to abandon the adobe houses they had already built and to move to some other place. All this did not come out until later.

In the meanwhile, the situation worsened from month to month, year to year. Strange cattle grazed off crops that had just come up, but the complaints of the Mennonites, their protests to the authorities were useless. Even the barbed wire fences that the Colonists finally decided to put up didn't change anything.

In many places whole crops were lost. Where their land was still uncultivated, the Colonists were often prevented from cutting the grass and making hay, so that they were forced to buy the necessary fodder. Often where the agrarians claimed the land, armed people kept the Mennonites from putting up fences or plowing the land.

For two years attempts were made to improve the situation through preliminary compromises, so that it would be possible, at least, to accomplish some of the necessary work. But again and again, the Mennonites went to their trouble for nothing and were unable to work much of their land. Because of this, the first bitter complaints were heard among the Colonists as early as 1924 – expressions of the wish to return to Canada, "…where we didn't have to put up with this kind of thing." And the Colony well might have returned to Canada if it had not been for Administrator Abram J. Neudorf, himself one of those seriously affected by the agrarians, but who kept advising the Colonists to proceed with forbearance, patience, and confidence.

He spared no efforts, left no means untried to resolve the delicate situation to the satisfaction of everyone. When the solution finally came – as hoped for – three years later, and the agrarians moved off the Mennonites' land, the great, unexpected miracle was that after the long period of trouble, the agrarians left in good spirits. No hostility, no vindictiveness remained behind. On the contrary, the Mennonites' relationship with the neighboring agrarians improved remarkably with time, the more there was opportunity to become acquainted and the more the agrarians became convinced that these gentle, upright strangers had by no means come into the country for the purpose of curtailing the rights of the residents or to crowd them from their place.

THE AGRARIANS ALSO HAD A RIGHT

But we haven't come to that point yet. Before me is a large stack of reports that were written up in the villages at that time, documenting calumnies and damages that were suffered by individual Colonists in the years 1922-24. The lists of these from my Old Colony archives are longer than they are a pleasure to read. At the beginning, no one escaped dissentions, which as a result of strained relations were entirely unavoidable. But it cannot be, nor shall it be, my duty with this book to enumerate case for case. Doing so would be to miss our real purpose, which is to comprehend and understand.

And so, it would be wrong if on the basis of the great damages suffered by the Mennonites at the time, we were to condemn the Mexican agrarians <u>suma sumarum</u>. No, these people, too, had their rights, and believing that their cause was just, they quite understandably refused to retreat from their claims when the foreign Colonists came into the country.

In addition, it was certainly not their fault that the Mennonites came to Mexico just at the moment when the agrarian experiment was to be put into motion. "No one can plane a board with making shavings." This old saying is borne out here to the fullest extent. And so, it was unavoidable that the Mennonites came in for a full share of difficulties. We should not forget that basically the agrarians demanded no more than their right, in this case, the right to their land, for the free possession of which they had shed so much blood. And where until now the land had not been granted them legitimately, they

believed they had the right to claim possession of it on their own authority, so as to secure from the very onset by the means of the "seizing for ownership" principle later official sanction.

And further, let us not forget that against foreigners in particular, the common people felt a deep resentment, which, especially in Chihuahua, was not just by chance, having its roots in the peons' many years of subjugation; they had hardly escaped their original Spanish masters before they were forced for many more decades to perform hard labor in foreign mining projects.

Before the revolution there were only two sources of income in Chihuahua, both gigantic: cattle raising and mining. Cattle raising was in the hands of a few privileged Mexicans who were mostly of Spanish and Creole descent. The mines were in the hands of foreign industrialists. Especially the mining industry consumed thousands upon thousands of people. And if what they were paid did not exactly justify the often-raised objection by the miners that they were working for starvation wages, what little they were paid quickly ran through their fingers and left them in deepest poverty, while the gold and silver they mined wound up abroad, creating millionaires in New York and London.

This situation had not escaped the common people. It had supplied a sword which leaders and political functionaries had swung for many years against any and all foreign elements in Mexico, wielding it as well to secure more and more concessions for the labor unions. And so, it had become obvious that there were well-founded reasons for the differences between the Colonists and the agrarians, although only the fewest of the Colonists understood these reasons at the time.

In my Old Colony archives are many interesting documents concerning the problems with the agrarians: letters, translations, lists of complaints, records of hearings before city officials and courts of law, governmental directives, records of meetings with the governor of the state at which I was present as an interpreter or received recognition as a representative of the Colony. Finally, there is a record of my trip early in 1925 to Mexico City as a special emissary of the Colony, commissioned to appear in its interest before the president of the federal government, the result of which appearance led in the same year to a final solution of the problem.

ECLIPSE OF THE SUN IN 1923

I got the first foretaste of the work that still awaited me in this matter in the fall of 1923, just a few months after my arrival in San Antonio. A government commission had arrived from the capital to investigate on the spot the state of affairs between the agrarians and the Mennonites. On the same day an eclipse of the sun was to take place, which, according to astronomers, would be best observed from Mexico. Since we were located on the lonesome hill of San Antonio in the middle of the prairie at an altitude of some 6500 feet above sea level, we were uniquely affected by this event, which we were able to observe unhindered through smoke-blackened glass.

It seemed as if we stood at the peak of the world. Our earth appeared rather strange under the peculiar lighting of the eclipsed sun. It suddenly seemed to me to resemble maps I had seen of the surface of the moon. The endless, lonely prairie appeared all at once cold and dead, and the mountains cast long, weird shadows. One clearly felt that one lived on a planet, a strange heavenly body which, subject to peculiar, unfathomable laws, goes its way in the endless universe, fully removed and untouched by our human norms and rules.

We all stood and marveled at the distinctness of our shadows, on which each individual hair was clearly visible. By "we" I mean the commission from Mexico City, consisting in part of very high officials

and their staffs, and us San Antonions. The marvelous drama staged by Nature had suddenly brought about our acquaintance with each other and now led us into a lively exchange of ideas. When the sun finally beamed down on us again in its full majesty and beauty, we proceeded to the "Hotel Jansen" to toast our common experience with a drink.

The commission stayed for two weeks. I could not ascertain in detail the actual work that was to be done to solve the land question, since for the time being, I was only an onlooker. Functioning as main interpreters and sources of information were Jakob Wiebe and Robert Karl, who was my boss at the time, also Carlos Meyer, who spoke good English and also some German and who, as a member of the House of Zuloage, did everything he could to make the stay of the commission in Bustillos and San Antonio as pleasant as possible.

The gentlemen of the commission drove out to the Mennonite villages and the ranchos of the agrarians in the elegant automobile of the Bustillos family. Statements were taken down in writing, reports were composed, promises were given. I had the opportunity to make friends with one of the members of the commission, an engineer by the name of Carillo, and from him I learned privately all kinds of things that didn't please me at all. Instead of a clear decision on the matter, one that would finally certify that the land belonged to the Colonists, there was repeated talk of all sorts of negotiations, of concessions and promises, of attempts to be made to work out agreements in other ways.

More than anything else, I had the very definite impression that the two main parties concerned, on the one side the agrarians and on the other the House of Zuloaga, seller of the land to the Colonists, did not have any particular interest in a quick solution of the problem and seemed again and again to favor postponements. In the end, the Mennonites, who had suffered the most, received the least consideration. The whole business was postponed again and again under countless pretexts and endless excuses.

After the commission had departed, taking with them what later turned out to be the completely useless hopes of the Mennonites, I became more and more preoccupied with the thoughts I had exchanged with the engineer, Carillo. So much seemed obvious: whereas the Mennonites believed that the only issue was the security of their rights, in other words, the early withdrawal of the agrarians from their land, the official interest was much more in lulling the conflict between the sellers of the land and the agrarians, a conflict in which the Mennonites played, as far as both sides were concerned, only a minor role.

If things were to go on this way, the matter could remain unresolved for a long, long time. Success could only be counted upon if it were possible to bypass the conflict between the sellers of the land and the agrarians and to bring the distress and legal claims of the Mennonites into the foreground with the government, so that it would be forced to act upon the rights of the Mennonites, which were clearly not in doubt, and then decide the less clear issue between the sellers and the agrarians, instead of doing it the other way around. In other words, what had just been done by the commission and was represented as a great act of assistance to the Mennonites was the wrong thing entirely.

HAVING SAID "A" I ALSO HAD TO SAY "B"

From that time on, these thoughts would not leave me. They caused me as much concern as they did the leaders of the Colony on whom it was incumbent to solve the problem. If only I could help these people! If only it were possible to bring the dispute to a decision! If only one could lay the land the Mennonites had purchased before them free and clear, without any of those annoyances and problems that made their life so endlessly difficult! But having had such thoughts, I had said "A;" and whoever has said

"A," is also obligated to say "B." And so before I really knew what was happening, I was in the middle of the Colony's struggle for their land, a struggle that had to be carried on in two directions.

REVOLUTION AND A CHANGE IN PRESIDENTS

The struggle was interrupted in December of that year by the revolution led by the well-known Mexican politician Adolfo de la Huerta, who initiated a reactionary movement against the rule of General Obregon. It was a serious business and developed into a thoroughgoing test of the government that had finally crystallized under Obregon after so many years of revolution. There were soon not enough federal troops to put down the revolution so that in those states which had remained loyal, mercenaries who were ready to risk their lives for six pesos per day were recruited. Chihuahua was among the loyal states, and a large number of agrarians from that state moved away to the south with the govern-troops.

It took months before the revolution was decided in a victory for the government. It is self-understood that during all this time, the solution to the agrarian problem could not be advanced a single step.

Immediately following came the regular change in presidents, accomplished this time without any bloody incidents. Nevertheless, as is well known, the country is always very restless in those years when there is a change in government. There is great distrust in what the future may bring; business suffers markedly and the activities in the various government bureaus become uncertain, since a large turnover in governmental personnel is in the offing. Everything is concentrated on the coming elections and the new political upheavals.

USELESS EFFORTS

And so, there were two things that stood in the way of continuing the work on the agrarian problem during the change in presidents. For one thing, the interest of those still in office tended to wane; and then, after the change in administration, it was necessary for the new officials to work themselves into their positions, while we obligated ourselves to win their interest. When a year later, I made my trip to Mexico City, I was forced to realize that despite the great amount of work already done and reports that had already been made, hardly anything was known about the Mennonites in the bureaus that were involved. And what little was known about them was clearly stamped by one-sidedness, being whatever, the agrarians had passed on to the Comision Nacional Agraria, which represented them to the government.

During this time, from December 1923 until April 1924, came also my trip to the USA, where I decided to go after I lost my position when the banking house of David S. Russek & Co. was closed. But when the firm of P.E. Melendez & Cia. called me back to San Antonio, I returned to begin work again under full sail.

I had been back only a few days when the Colony formed a commission consisting of Klaas Heide, A.J. Neudorf, Jakob Friesen, Cornelius Wolf, and Julius Wiebe to send to Mexico City, accompanied by Mr. William H. Kraft of the House of Zuloaga, and Guillermo Porras, an attorney, to find a solution to the problem of the agrarians by dealing directly with the president of the republic, who at that time was still General Obregon.

I have in my records a copy of the letter that introduced the commission to the president, written by the governor of the state of Chihuahua, in which he laid the Colonists' problem with the agrarians on

the heart of the president of Mexico in a manner most warm and gracious toward the Mennonites. My records also include a description in which the meeting of the commission with the president is characterized as having been extraordinarily satisfying. Obregon was, of course, the man who had admitted the Mennonites into the country and hence had a particular interest in their welfare.

The commission returned, and nothing happened.

Don Pantaleon Melendez, the head of the firm by that same name, which had an office in Chihuahua but its main business interests in San Antonio, was at this time the mayor of Chihuahua, a circumstance that worked extraordinarily in our favor. Through him it was easy to come into contact with the new governor, Col. Jesus Antonio Almeida, and to present to him in various meetings the matter concerning the Mennonites in such a way that he actually prevented again and again through personal interference the worst possible encroachments on the rights of the Colony.

But all that was not nearly enough. After all, our goal was not merely to help the Colonists from one emergency to another. For now, our one and only purpose was to get the agrarians to move off the land without any compromises. What, specifically, kept causing new difficulties and who the people were who continuously managed to manipulate matters away from the central issue and complicate it through all possible kinds of maneuvers, making its solution seem always to be more difficult than it actually was, so that it was constantly postponed, was at that time very hard to determine. The fact is that in spite of the governor's cooperation, the situation did not improve.

THE MEETING WITH THE GOVERNOR ON NOVEMBER 19, 1924

Very critical for later detailed discussions was the loss of a number of documents and papers in connection with a meeting with Governor Almeida, a meeting which was otherwise one of the most successful we had with him. It took place on November 19, 1924 and included A.J. Neudorf, Cornelius Wolf, Johann H. Wiebe, Jakob Enns, and me. Since I was the only one who spoke Spanish, I alone did the talking for the group. Through the arrangements of Mayor Melendez, the meeting had been planned in such a way that most of the forenoon could be devoted to it, giving us an exceptionally adequate amount of time to talk over every point with the governor in its proper order of importance.

For this meeting, I supplied myself with all the necessary papers, records, maps, etc. The governor was planning to go to the capital two days later and agreed to discuss with the president personally the matters we had brought up with him. For this purpose, he desired to take along the pertinent documentation in our papers, which were organized and put together for his use. Fortunately, I had copies of some of these materials, for we never saw them again. The loss was probably less the fault of the governor than of the bureaus in Mexico City that were responsible for studying them.

Even though this was a painful loss for the preservation of the history of the Colony, in other ways the meeting of November 19, 1924, ended with good results. I had tried a number of times before to make use of the question of taxes to the advantage of the Mennonites. Here was a direct way to get the interest of the government in the problem of the agrarians. If the Colonists did not pay or were not required to pay taxes on the land occupied by the agrarians, the government treasury would lose the revenues in question. Hence the government should logically be interested in assisting the Mennonites in occupying the land they had legally purchased, so that the full amount of the revenues would again be forthcoming.

The governor now realized that it was wrong to collect taxes from the Mennonites on land occupied by the agrarians. He ordered that these taxes should be lifted for the time being, and so at least two things

had been accomplished: first, the direct participation of the government in the problem had been achieved; it would now also have to interest itself in the solution. Secondly, there was the tax saving for the Colony.

In addition, the governor ordered a police detachment to be sent to San Antonio for the protection and security of the Colony. At the same time, he also sent notices to the local authorities in San Antonio, urging them to treat the Mennonites with consideration and forbearance until the problem with the agrarians was permanently resolved. And finally, it could be assumed, or at least hoped, that with the insight provided by our documents, the personal discussion that was to take place in a few days between the president of the republic and the sympathetic governor of Chihuahua would result in the near future in a favorable decision regarding the legal claim of the Mennonites.

The situation did, in fact, seem to improve somewhat, as some relaxation in the atmosphere so heavily loaded until now became noticeable. But all of November and then December of 1924 passed without bringing the desired decision, or without even offering any sort of indication that a decision was, in fact, forthcoming. And so, the year 1925 began exactly as had each recent preceding year. In answer to inquiries at various offices in Chihuahua, the same empty assurances and promises as before came back, and soon the old unrest had returned.

THE FIRST THREAT TO THE CONTINUED EXISTENCE OF THE COLONY

Most unfortunately, there was quite suddenly other frightening news, which had a crushing effect on the Colony. The word was that the government would prohibit any further migration of Mennonites into Mexico. Furthermore, it was said that the privileges granted by the former government were to be examined and perhaps withdrawn in so far as they were in conflict with the newly planned laws for Mexico with which the government of General Plutarco Elias Calles intended to reshape the social life of the country. In this regard, I need only to call attention here to the closing of the churches, the suppression of the priesthood, the curtailments relating to aliens in general particularly to their religious practices, to the new school ordinances, etc.

In the view of Klaas Heide, the Colony could not afford to lose another moment in getting clarification at the source, namely, the government in Mexico City, on the entire complex of questions that promised to develop into a serious threat to the continued existence of the Colony. In particular, it was essential to get a decision one way or the other on the agrarian problem.

Ohm Heide discussed the entire matter with Elder Johann Friesen and A.J. Neudorf. They concluded that the best thing would be to go to Mexico City immediately.

AS THE AUTHORIZED AGENT OF THE COLONY TO THE GOVERNMENT OF MEXICO

But these men did not want to arouse a lot of attention and disturb the Colony. And so, a large commission was not to be considered. Besides disturbing the Colony, a large delegation would delay matters in Mexico City, if only because of the number of its members and the formalities – the kinds of things with which the Colonists were already well enough acquainted, such as moving numbers of people from place to place with an interpreter; waiting in antechambers of high officials; the formalities of the discussions; the written explanations and proposals; and before and after and in between the waiting. Always the waiting and waiting and waiting. And they were, after all, in a hurry.

And so, the fewer people the better. Perhaps only two; best of all, only one. Without a doubt, Klaas Heide should have been this one person, the only one to come into question for this critical journey to the capital. But he did not want to go. He, too, would again need an interpreter, and with him, too, matters would not proceed without formalities. In short, one morning he came into our office and said that it was the wish of Elder Friesen and himself that I go to Mexico City on behalf of the Colony.

With this I had been given a commission which certainly honored me, but I was a bit worried about being able to accomplish it. I was to appear before President Calles, "the strong man of Mexico," as he was called abroad? I would by myself represent the Colony before him and the federal republic? Speak for thousands of ethnic German settlers whose continued prosperity was at stake? Champion their cause in such a way that they would have the opportunity to continue their endeavors in peace? I was to attempt now to get a final decision one way or another in the matter of the agrarians, a decision that had been delayed for three years, and which, if I was to serve any purpose, would have to be in favor of the Colony? Didn't I lack the necessary age for all this? The experience? The power to persuade? Had not the leaders of the Colony, together with their legal representative, been to the capital already the year before without accomplishing anything?

Meanwhile there wasn't much time for such thoughts. "You are the man," Klaas Heide insisted, as he waved all my reservations aside.

In all haste we put together the necessary materials, discussed everything once more from A to Z, and then I went to Chihuahua without further delay, where the official credentials authorizing me to represent the Colony were sent to me, signed by Klaas Heide under the authorization of the Colony.

First in my line of communication was the governor of Chihuahua, who, through the auspices of Pantaleon Melendez, received me immediately and who sent along with me a personal letter of introduction to General Plutarco Elias Calles, the president of the republic. The governor, as well as Pantaleon Melendez in his position as mayor of Chihuahua, gave me more writings to take along, of which the most important were for General Inacio C. Enriquez, the forerunner of Governor Almeida, and for the old General Eugenio Martinez, one of the most highly regarded veterans of the old school, who, not so long ago, had been commander of the military zone of Chihuahua, but was now the commanding general of the federal district.

Without going into further details about the trip, which I began on January 23, let me say here that General Martinez met me and received me in a most obliging manner when I arrived in the old Aztec capital, taking it upon himself to introduce me to the president and other government officials.

And so, after only a few days, I stood on the historical grounds of the Mexican national palace, from which the destiny of the land has been determined since the time of the Spanish viceroys. The general gave me an encouraging pat on the shoulder as he presented me to the highest official of the nation, President Plutarco Elias Calles, who showed himself to be willing to receive information without digression and expressed a keen interest in the matters I presented to him. Upon his orders, the analysis of my mission was transferred to the ministry of agriculture, and here again, through General Martinez, I was received by the minister in charge the very next day.

COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE MENNONITES

After listening to a brief presentation by me, the minister turned the matter over to the director of the department of lands and colonization, where I had to go in and out almost daily for a week before

everything had been clarified. As I had feared, the various offices were without exception either poorly informed or completely uninformed about the Colonists. What I heard first from all quarters was complaints against them.

It was said that they had not come into the country to be of any benefit to it, but rather to live their odd way of life and serve only themselves. They not only looked down upon the Mexicans, but also refused friendly association with them and were constantly looking for quarrels with the agrarians, and so on and so forth.

Added to this, considerable damage had been done to their cause from a source that would seem most unlikely – from Mennonite circles themselves. Much ill feeling had ben created by a number of articles written by a Mennonite from one of the churches in the USA; these articles had been published in a variety of periodicals and had come to the attention of the Mexican government in connection with the colonization plan of some Mennonite refugees who had come to Mexico directly from Russia. Apparently, these "Russlaender," supported by the Mennonite Aid Committee in Kansas, had not found with the Mexican government the interest they had expected, and for this the Old Colonists were supposed to be the one and only reason. In the articles referred to, they were described as a "narrow-minded" and "self-centered" people who were making a very bad impression on the Mexican government.

Such a view was, of course, all the more damaging because it originated from a Mennonite pen. Already in the previous year, the delegation of Old Colonists that had come to the capital had had to come to terms with these articles. Without a doubt, many of the misunderstandings would have been avoided if these articles had never been printed. And it would certainly also have been better for the "Russlaender," who were trying unsuccessfully to put down roots in Irapuato and Rosario at this time. In the long run, such statements would be found to be without validity, since they could be quickly refuted by the facts.

TURNABOUT AND GOOD RESULTS

The more opportunity the ministry was given to become acquainted with the Old Colony's point of view, the more it began to swing around. Before long, it was apparent that the quarrel with the agrarians had nothing to do with the Mennonites, but represented, rather, a problem to be solved solely between the agrarians and the sellers of the land and that it concerned the Mennonites only in so far as they had coincidentally, and through no fault of their own, come between the two parties concerned, so to become the actual victims to suffer in this quarrel.

From the moment that this was clearly understood, everything else became simplified. Three years before, the Colonists had brought the land in confidence and good faith, with the specific guarantee in the sales contract that the land was indeed available and not subject to encumbrances. If the agrarians now had a claim to this land, it had been illegally sold to the Mennonites

The director of the department of lands and colonization soon proved to be extraordinarily sympathetic and kept his promise to bring the matter to a quick solution. This man, very biased at first because of false or else lacking information, soon became a friend of the Colonists.

If it was said that the Mennonites had come to exploit the land, the truth was that until now there couldn't have been any talk, even of income from the newly settled areas. On the contrary, the Colonists had brought several million pesos worth of dollars into the country and had invested this money in a manner that was of greatest importance to the economy of the state of Chihuahua. They certainly had not

moved into Mexico as rich capitalists, but as individual owners of small parcels of land, which was exactly what the country was striving to achieve for its farmers.

If the Colonists stood accused of "constantly looking for quarrels with the agrarians," then there was the evidence in the reports of former officials and commissions, as well as in excerpts from records of court proceedings and hearings before municipal authorities, that the Mennonites were, rather, the ones entitled to complaints. It was they who from the very beginning had had the most to suffer in the pernicious situation.

If it had been reported that the Mennonites were unsociable and hostile, incompatible with their Mexican neighbors, it could easily be shown to the contrary that they had answered the harassment, provocations, and assaults they had suffered with forbearance and consideration, never reaching for a weapon and constantly attempted to do what would foster peaceful association with their neighbors.

If they were charged – this point seemed especially to irritate the agrarians – with "arbitrarily closing" most of the old roads and riding trails, "making it more difficult to go from place to place," it could be proved to the last penny by the tabulation of the contributions made by individual villages that to date they had spent exactly $28,483.92 for road and bridge construction, drainage ditches and other improvements, and that the old, abandoned roads had been replaced everywhere by new and more practical ones, so that one could speak of how they had made traffic easier, but never of making it more difficult to get around.

And, in conclusion, if there was still the bitter aftertaste of those published declarations issuing from Mennonite circles themselves, presenting our Colonists as a "narrow-minded" and "self-centered" people who were making "a very bad impression" in Mexico, one needed only to read through the letters commending the Colonists that had been written by the governor to realize that the state of Chihuahua was in every way satisfied with them and most interested in a solution to their problem.

All this did not fail to make a definite impression on the man with whom I dealt primarily during my mission in Mexico City. One thing we were able to accomplish immediately: there would be no further talk about a revision of the freedoms which had been specifically documented for the Mennonites through the preceding president, General Obregon.

"Tell the Mennonites," the director of the department of lands and colonization informed me officially "that they have nothing to worry about. At least for the duration of the government of General Calles, we guarantee that the concessions granted them will be upheld and that also beyond that there is no reason to expect a change."

So, for the time being we were relieved of this concern. As to the continuation of the migration, this was also decided according to the wishes of the Mennonites while I was in Mexico City. When the government understood that until now only a portion of the Old Colonists had arrived in Mexico, that others were still in Canada, disposing of their interests there, and that they intended to take over eventually land that had already been purchased in Mexico, it was determined once and for all at the highest level that no hindrances could be laid in the way of the Colonists while the immigration was regarded as incomplete.

There was also, with good results, a careful management, as far as the Mennonites were concerned, of the famous Article 27, with which the Calles regime went about the so-called "defanaticism" of the country by a complete circumscription of religious practices. We were told while still in Mexico City that the Colonists would not be harassed in this respect. And the government has since kept its promise. Whereas later all of Mexico became a priestless country, so to speak – the Article 27 allowed the entire

state of Chihuahua only one priest – the worship services in the Colony continued in the old, accustomed manner without interference, The majority of the Colonists were almost totally unaware that for years Mexico was without functioning priests and the right to public worship services.

THE FINAL SOLUTION OF THE AGRARIAN PROBLEM

With these three resolutions in my pocket, I could certainly have begun my return trip in the knowledge that I had not gone to Mexico City in vain. But even though these three concessions were without a doubt of positive importance to the Colony and would be welcomed with great joy by those who had commissioned me, they, nevertheless, seemed of secondary importance to me at the time. I could never view my mission as completed until the main issue, the problem with the agrarians, was resolved once and for all.

Through my old friend, General Martinez, I attempted to gain one more interview with the president before leaving for home.

The general advised against it. After all, the matter was now in the hands of the ministry for agriculture. After having dragged on for three years, a decision could not be expected over night. For better or for worse, I had to admit that he was right. So, I went with the general for a last interview with the minister of agriculture instead, a meeting also attended by the director of the department for lands and colonization. The conference turned out satisfactorily, and the end of the whole matter was as follows:

The government promised to contact the state of Chihuahua immediately, urging it to see to it forthwith that the agrarians were given other land of equal or greater value. The government promised as well to send an engineer to San Antonio within the next few days with special instructions to check everything once more on the spot and to initiate as the representative of the federal government the moving of the agrarians to other land.

When I took my leave, the minister once more assured me that the situation would now be definitely resolved. President Calles, he said, intended to visit the state of Chihuahua and the Mennonite Colony in the fall, so that by then everything had to be in order.

With this last information, I left Mexico City, and after an absence of three weeks, found myself in Chihuahua again. I had to report to the governor immediately. Almost simultaneously with me the first directives arrived at the local office of the Comision Nacional Agraria. And from that time forward, the end of the matter came with surprising speed.

I had been in San Antonio only a few days and had made my report to Klaas Heide – but had not even seen Elder Friesen and Administrator Neudorf as yet – when the government representative arrived. If this man were to take his duty seriously, he would not be able to avoid seeing where and how far into the Mennonite lands the agrarians had established themselves. He would have to inform himself of the damages that the Mennonites had suffered; and he would have to become convinced of the undeniable fact that things could not continue as they were.

He read the land-purchasing contracts, spoke with the leaders of the Colony, and spent his evenings going through documentation with me and was forced to realize that what had been presented in Mexico City conformed to the truth. After him came the government commission which divided the new land among the Agrarians. The final solution to the problem, as ordered by the government, called for the following:

All the agrarians had to get off land belonging to the Mennonites. The House Zuloaga was obligated to pay each family two hundred dollars in cash for moving expenses. It was further obligated to provide the agrarians with good land in the vicinity of San Antonio, and in addition, tracts in San Antonio itself on which they could build their houses. (Originally everything as far as the eye could see belonged to the enormous estate held by this family.) The agrarians were also to receive the necessary lumber for the building of houses and fences. In addition, the House Zuloaga was directed to build a dam on the west side of the hill of San Antonio at a cost of twelve thousand dollars, although it is said to have cost considerably more.

And so, we can see that the former owners were the ones to carry the greatest burden in the end. Their very understandable efforts to defend themselves against such hard and costly stipulations in the form of repeated attempts to bring about easier conditions or to effect accommodating compromises had naturally done their part in postponing the solution to this problem for so long.

But the time had to be decided sometime, and this time had come. Someone had to be the loser, who would have to open his purse, for it was not possible for everyone to win. And since the agrarians were not only poor as church mice, but also enjoyed the government's special preference, and since in this conflict the Mennonites had finally been recognized as an innocent, uninvolved third party, which, nevertheless, had suffered great losses through no fault of its own, the main burden fell perforce on the shoulders of the former owners. And when they became convinced that nothing more could be done to change the government's decision; they stopped their resistance and did their part to bring the matter to a quick end.

In the long run, however, the owners did not fare at all badly, for the government gave them back the site of San Antonio itself. And since later the area experienced steady growth, the owners likely gained back a number of times over through the sale of building lots the outlay that had been required of them because of the agrarians.

Suddenly there was life in the otherwise quiet San Antonio. The government commission measured and divided the new land for the agrarians and even a Mennonite delegation was called upon to participate in moving and in resettling them. Also present was the representative from Mexico City, and even the sellers had sent their people. The governor came out personally by car to convince himself that the work was being carried out properly.

The rest is quickly told. The houses in the western part of Cuauhtemoc are in large part still those that were built at the time by the resettled agrarians. One after another the areas they had formerly occupied were cleared. Some of the last of the usable houses left behind were blown up by the Mennonites, lest someone hit upon the idea of moving into them again. Three months later the agrarian problem was finally solved once and for all.

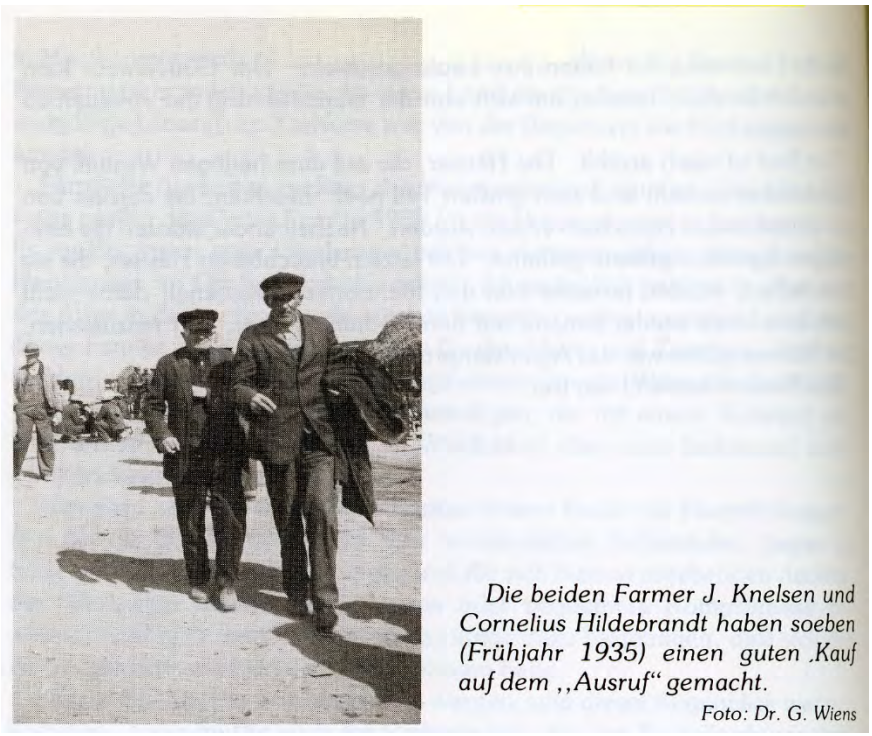
The land of the Mennonites was free.

Ein mexikanischer Nachbar kommt per Esel zu Besuch.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Mexikanische ,,Agraristen" auf dem von den Altkoloniern gekauften Land in den kritischen Jahren von 1922 bis 1925.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus



Die beiden Farmer J. Knelsen und Cornelius Hildebrandt haben soeben (Frühjahr 1935) einen guten ‚Kauf auf dem ,,Ausruf" gemacht.
Foto: Dr. G. Wiens

8. Milestones

DON LOLO

After the dark cloud that had hung over the Mennonites' colonization effort in the form of the agrarian problem had disappeared, the way before the Colonists seemed to lie in bright sunlight, so to speak; of course it did not always remain bright. Again, and again, sinister clouds darkened it. Like milestones along the way, events of a most dissimilar nature have remained fixed in my memory and are found recorded in my diary or in my files on the Colony.

Just a few months after the final solution of the agrarian problem, there was an uprising in Santa Isabel and Carretas against the government by a man known by his short name as "Don Lolo" and by his full name as Dolores Miramontes. It was a revolutionary undertaking of an entirely local nature, exclusively directed against the state government of Chihuahua, with whose leadership Don Lolo and his followers were dissatisfied.

For a few days, things looked bad. The strangest rumors were flying around. The revolutionists, who had begun their movement scarcely fifty kilometers away from us were expected to turn first to San Antonio and possibly the villages surrounding it to obtain what they needed for their undertaking. This suggested the usual scenario: cut telegraph and telephone lines, torn-up railroad tracks, robberies in the smaller towns, arrests here and there, followed by summary executions – all in all a period of complete uncertainty about what was actually going on. What had actually happened and what it was all about usually remained a mystery until much later, when the affair was decided in favor of one or the other party.

Meanwhile we all had the impression from the beginning that Don Lolo's undertaking stood on rather shaky legs. But we couldn't be sure, and in the meantime, we faced the disturbing question of what to do.

At first the Colonists were hardly aware of what was happening; but what if Don Lolo suddenly appeared in San Antonio, pointed a pistol at those of us from the Melendez bank, and demanded funds for his revolution. My employer was out of town, and with him his brothers who were active in his business, and so it was up to me to look after the bank and the money that was in it. This responsibility, which I was also obliged to carry out later in similar situations, weighed heavily on me because the money did not belong only to my employers, but above all to my friends in the Mennonite villages, who knew little or nothing about what was going on. My friend, Walter Peters, who was the manager of another branch of the Melendez enterprises, put me on to a good idea.

"Why don't you hide the money in the corn?" he suggested. "I'd like to see anyone find it there."

Right! We had large corn granaries behind our place of business, in which the grain was piled over six feet deep.

The two of us dragged a dozen or so bags of silver coins, a thousand pesos at a time, into the granaries, where we buried them under piles of corn. Of course, I kept a smaller amount of money in the safe, which if worse came to worst, we could afford to lose.

That night I was taken from my house by two dangerous-looking thugs with revolvers, who led me to a car in which a third bull-necked fellow sat at the wheel. No one said anything, while I tried to think of an opportunity that would give me a chance to jump out of the car. But my two captors cleverly put me between the two of them and I sat there squeezed so tightly between them that I couldn't even have reached for my pistol, had it become necessary to do so. After several very painful minutes, I realized that we were indeed headed to the Melendez bank.

And so, it was happening after all. In front of the bank, a fourth man waited for me with a slip of paper. It was an order to make payment made out by the government representative who had taken over here. I was pleasantly surprised by the small amount of the order, which, fortunately for me, was accompanied by a telegram from the headquarters of my firm in Chihuahua, directing me to make the payment and to charge it to the government.

But making the payment was more easily said than done. That I had concealed the larger amount of our cash reserves under the corn in the granaries was a secret I considered unwise to reveal for the time being and the money I had left in the safe would not be enough.

When I informed my escorts that I probably did not have sufficient funds on hand, they only grinned. They said that they could not let me go until I had paid out the full amount.

I thought of the contents of the safes in the store and gasoline agency that also belonged to Melendez enterprises and were managed by the brothers Ignacio and Pedro Jose, but these two, as we have already noted, were out of town. There was only my friend, Walter Peters, the second in command, who could open the safe in the store for us if the day's receipts in the drawer were insufficient. But at the moment, he, too, was unavailable. In response to my request, he had stayed in my house to protect my sister, who, although she was ordinarily quite resolute and fearless, was, nevertheless, a female being and would otherwise have been alone in the house.

We were surprised by what greeted us at the store, which was located next to the bank. A lusty group of men had come inside and were making themselves at home. In the glow of the oil lamp, bottles of tequila that had found their way off the shelves and across the counter were making the rounds from

hand to hand. We smelled sardines; the floor was littered with peanut and sunflower seed shells. The air was as thick with cigarette smoke as in a bar. Bursts of laughter and loud palaver filled the room.

With some effort I made my way through the bustle of feasting and drinking. When I reached the cash register, no one had touched it, even though, lucky for me, it was unlocked, and I was able to come up with the money still needed without any difficulty.

After that, my three nocturnal companions assisted me in clearing out the place. It took a number of more or less friendly requests, some of them accompanied by a bit of pressure, before, one after another, all the intruders were out of the store, which had become poorer by a few bottles of tequila, a number of packages of American cigarettes, and some cans of sardines.

As I stepped outside and threw the door hard into its lock behind me, I heard a few scattered shots in the distance, then a guitar quite far away, and voices, a few alcoholic shouts in the impenetrable darkness, under the cover of which I made my way home, safe as a sleepwalker, for I knew every stone on this windswept hill.

And so, we had gotten by once more. But as long as I live, I won't forget that pitch-black night.

The unrest lasted only a few days. Don Lolo and his revolutionaries never did show up in San Antonio. In the end, he had humbly to draw in his horns, as his undertaking collapsed on itself. But he managed to secure his own safety in time by riding to the safe border of the USA on horseback.

PRESIDENTIAL VISIT

In November of 1925, the president of the republic, General Plutarco Elias Calles, kept his promise and visited the state of Chihuahua and the Mennonites. Late on the morning of November 17, his olive-colored special train arrived at the small station building of San Antonio, where it was immediately so swarmed over with people that getting to the main actor in this drama was impossible. Accompanied by the minister of agriculture, Luis Leo; General Marcel Caraveo, commander of the fifth military zone; the governor of the state of Chihuahua; Pantaleon Melendez, my employer and mayor of Chihuahua; and a further considerable number of dignitaries, the president was obliged while still on the platform to listen to a few words of greeting from the local authorities, the agrarians and working class representatives, who would have him all to themselves.

When he was finally able to leave the train, he immediately got into a waiting car, and, before there was time for anything else, he was driven out to the Mennonite villages. All the leaders of the Colony had gathered at the station, intending to greet him formally and to hand him a memorandum which I had composed according to their wishes. Only after he had received it was he to be formally invited to visit the villages, and not until then was the round trip through the villages to begin.

Now there was nothing to be done, except for the whole deputation to follow along behind and join the caravan headed for the more important villages. With the president were the representatives of the sellers of the land, who, if I recall correctly, had taken Jakob Wiebe along as interpreter.

The trip through the villages was exceedingly satisfying. It just happened to be harvest time, and so the president observed the Mennonites at their busiest – everywhere the high-loaded wagons carrying grain sheaves, the threshing machines, the full sacks of grain. The president saw the vigor with which the Colonists took hold, the order, the combined productive efforts of this small ethic group. General Calles was so impressed by what he saw that he offered a remark to those around him about what a pity

it was that he couldn't send every single Mexican agrarian here for instruction before he was handed his piece of land.

A large grandstand had been erected in San Antonio, on which the president with his retinue was to be entertained at a banquet. Here he also received a number of local delegations, as well as the leaders of the Colony, who now found the opportunity to greet him.

Accompanying the Mennonite delegation, I introduced its members to the president. He carried on a very lively conversation with us for a while. He was pleased to accept the expressions of thanks from the Mennonites for the peaceful manner in which the problem of the agrarians had finally been solved. The minister of agriculture asked for clarification on a few details of this problem, and our governor expressed extraordinary praise for the Colony in the same spirit in which he had consistently supported its cause heretofore. The president voiced his great satisfaction to the Mennonite delegation over what he had observed during his short visit among the villages and promised to keep an eye on the Colony in the future as well. In conclusion, he accepted the memorandum which the Colony's leaders had intended to present to him before he visited the villages.

The Mexicans had scheduled a bull fight, the first part of which the president obligated himself to watch. Then the high visitors took their leave, and soon the olive-colored train pulled away and disappeared beyond our gaze, which had followed it for a long distance in the direction of Malposa, at the entrance to the mountains in the west.

The memorandum that the Mennonites presented to the president was as follows:

November 17, 1925

Mr. President:

On the occasion of the high honor that comes to the entire region of San Antonio and consequently also to us through your visit, we permit ourselves as obedient servants of the supreme head of our country to express our thanks and veneration in the following brief memorandum.

In March of the year 1922, the Mexican government opened the doors of its land to the first Mennonite immigrant trains. All possible freedoms were kindly granted us, so that it became possible for us to found or first villages on the bare, unplowed soil and to undertake the task of making the fields productive. The privileges we were granted were of great importance to us, especially that of being allowed to import free of duty all the things necessary for our agricultural pursuits, for we faced a considerable struggle at first with material difficulties. Everything had to be bought and paid for with cash from the fodder for our cattle and horses to the construction materials for our buildings, as well as basic necessities, including food for our families.

Our lack of knowledge concerning the soil, the climate, and the working conditions, which could be gained only with time, as well as unfavorable weather and crop failures during the first two years, and not least, the failure of the banking house Russek, through which a substantial amount of the Mennonite capital needed to pay necessary expenses was lost, represented hindrances that could be overcome only through difficult personal sacrifices and the facilitations granted to us on part of the government.

Today we have the honor and satisfaction of demonstrating before your eyes, Mr. President, the favorable continuing development of our colony on Mexican soil.

Since 1922, various immigrant trains have arrived here yearly in the spring and in autumn. At present the Colony consists of 4641 members, living in forty-three villages. We await a further addition of three or four thousand members, for whom land and building sites have already been purchased.

Altogether the Colony owns approximately 100,000 hectares of land. Of these, some twenty to thirty thousand are already under cultivation. The amount of cultivated land increases from year to year as new immigrants arrive, so that the work goes on without stopping.

The crops which in our experience flourish best here are first of all oats and then flax, with which we have had splendid results. We have also recorded excellent yields from beans, barley, and corn, as is shown in the following tabulation.

HARVEST YIELDS FOR 1925

Oats	850-1700 kilograms per hectare			
Flax	750-1600	"	"	"
Beans	600-1000	"	"	"
Corn	500-1250	"	"	"
Barley	750-1200	"	"	"

The market for flax and oats still leaves something to be desired, and we are looking for more outlets for these crops. For the rest of our agricultural products there seems to be a steady demand.

The statistical information above gives us a basis on which to hope for further favorable developments in the undertakings of the Colony, which, until now, have been carried out with the friendly cooperation of the Mexican people and the protection of the government.

We keep this eminent protection in mind with steadfast gratitude. Through it the freedom of our faith, the practice of our religion, the administration of our schools, our exemption from military duty, the preservation of our customs and practices have been insured. For this reason, Mr. President, you will always find us prepared to render our peaceful services with joy and thankfulness for the welfare of our new homeland, Mexico.

If in closing it is permissible for us to express a special wish, we take advantage of such an opportunity and request in all fidelity that you effect also for the immigrants who are yet to arrive exemption from payment of import duty on the farming equipment and food supplies brought with them for the initial difficult period, and, if possible, that the high duty payment levied on the last trainloads be refunded.

We feel entitled to this request in view of the many gains and advantages we bring to the country by making the wasteland productive, by paying taxes, and by bringing an increase in commerce to the land; and we express a wish at the same time that you will visit our colony and allow us to demonstrate before your eyes the benefits we bring to the country.

Assuring you of our gratitude and highest respect,

We sign,
Signatures

San Antonio de los Arenales, Chih., November 17, 1925

THE MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE

A year later came a further clarification in the agrarians' situation which was also of advantage to the Colony and San Antonio in that it located a substantial number of agrarians who had not yet been

settled in a definite area and hence calmed their unrest. Thus, the Colonia Gardes was founded, named after the man who had started this group, which wished to settle in an area between Bustillos and San Antonio. To decide on the specific location the minister of agriculture, Luis Leon, came personally to Bustillos, that is to the place along the railroad where the settlement was to be established. Again, we appeared with a Mennonite delegation, since the minister wanted to make use of the opportunity to visit the Colony too. As always, so also this time, there were matters to discuss with him.

The train stopped in the middle of the open prairie, at a place where may years later the industrial town of Anuhac would be established, with its enormous manufacturing plants for Cellulose-Triply and other fiber products. The minister, accompanied by his wife, the beautiful former actress Celia Padilla, and a goodly number of officials and engineers stepped from the train, and after we had greeted each other, we all climbed to the top of the nearby hill, from which we could look over the entire region and from where the layout of the settlement was definitely determined. The engineers stayed behind to begin immediately with the surveying, and the rest of us started out for the Colony. Jakob Wiebe again accompanied the minister and his entourage, while I drove our car, accompanied by Baltazar Melendez, the two-man delegation from the Colony, and an official of the state government of Chihuahua.

We ate in one of the villages. Later I found opportunity to bring up some still unanswered questions primarily concerned with the repeated instances in which the Colony had been obliged to pay excessive import duty and the technical details connected with this problem. But the best thing for the Mennonites as far as the minister's visit was concerned was the opportunity it afforded them to see that (and in what way) their federal government concerned itself with them and that again a number of the landless agrarians had been settled without any difficulties for the Colony.

A year later, however, a whole series of new problems arose. Through a so-called Cuartelazo, that is a coup d'etat, the governor was thrown out of office long before his term was up, and new people took over the reins. The more the enforcement of the laws of the Calles government proceeded, the higher the political waves ran through the land.

GARRIDO CANABAL

In the south, Tomas Garrido Canabal, governor of the state of Tabasco, ruled the roost, frightening all God-fearing citizens because it was said that he intended from his position of power to create a soviet state on Mexican soil. Tabasco, one of the smallest states in the Mexican republic, took pride in being the advance guard for the carrying out of Article 3 and Article 27 of the Mexican constitution, and many other states strove to follow its example. But it must not be left unsaid here that this sort of thing did not involve the total populace, but rather mostly those who were in power, their followers, and the lowest social classes, which considered themselves "liberated." Article 3 decreed the so-called socialist school, which was to be free of all religious influence, of fanaticism, prejudices, or biases. Article 27 called for the circumscription – better, the elimination – of all religious activity, as well as the closing and confiscation of the churches. All these things were pushing up from the south and slowly beginning to rumble through the state of Chihuahua.

Soon religious persecution began. The churches became empty because religious observances were prohibited. The priests disappeared. Finally only a single priest was allowed for the entire state of Chihuahua, and that was as good as none, considering the vast area in which he was now the only one to minister to the souls of the people. In the beautiful colonial churches, the bells were tied down so that

they could no longer call out to the believers. The monasteries were closed, as were all schools taught by ecclesiastics.

The dead were buried in silence, without priestly escort or the sound of bells. Masses were read, children baptized, the Eucharist celebrated in complete secrecy only in private homes.

A SERIES OF DIFFICULTIES

For the time being, nothing happened to the Mennonites, but before long there was bad blood. How was it possible, the question went, that these foreigners were allowed to keep their churches, their ministers, and their worship services while the people of Mexico were forced to give up religion? These strangers were permitted what was proscribed for natives? Foreign protestants had more rights than Mexican Catholics? And so the complaints and grievances soon began, and one day the mayor of San Antonio received a weighty official document in which it was pointed out that the Mennonites were violating Article 27, and would he, the municipal president, please see to it that the laws relating to religion and the churches were immediately carried out also in the villages of the Mennonites.

THE CHURCHES, THE WAISENAMT, THE CEMETERIES, THE SCHOOLS, AND TAX QUESTIONS

But that was only the beginning. Now that the ball had started to roll, a whole series of other things were found to be offensive. Didn't the Mennonites also have an institution known as the Waisenamt? And didn't this institution manage hundreds of thousands of pesos for the Colonists on which it paid interest on deposits? And didn't it lend this money to other Colonists at a higher rate of interest than it paid out?

If so, then wasn't this Waisenamt in fact a regular bank, legally subject to national banking laws? And what had banking to do with agricultural colonization the only purpose for which the Mennonites had supposedly entered the country? And so before long official summons arrived, ordering a detailed investigation of the Waisenamt with the stipulation that if it was found to be an illegally operating bank, it was to be closed forthwith, pending prosecution.

At the same time, some clever-minded soul had ascertained that the Colony had far too many cemeteries. What? Every village had its own cemetery? Did the law, perhaps, provide for this? Certainly not! And it was now read out of existing laws that the entire Colony was entitled to only one cemetery.

And the schools? Just as with the churches! All other citizens had to close their private schools and send their children to the government schools and the socialistic instructors, while only these foreigners had a right to their own schools and teachers and were not forced to subject their children to the socialistic educational program, but were even allowed to continue religious instruction in their schools? Was that not a provocation of all the surrounding Mexicans? And so, before long the municipal president received more directives ordering the strict, equal administration of the expanded Article 3 of the constitution.

And if that was not enough, new tax questions came up. To the levies already imposed, someone suddenly remembered to add the vehicle tax. Every conveyance, whether small or large, was from now on to carry a plate, just as it was required of cars. And since in this respect, the Colonists had ignored

laws long in effect, this tax would also have to be paid now retroactively for the past years. And so suddenly thousands of pesos were demanded all at once from the Mennonites.

In short, the reader now finds verified here what I emphasized at the beginning – namely, that the leaders of the Colony did not have it easy by any means and that they were confronted by tasks whose solutions demanded gigantic efforts and sacrifices.

It is now necessary to fall back on the privileges to maintain the full freedom of the church, of which the Colony had been explicitly assured in the concessions granted by General Obregon. It was essential now to establish that the Waisenamt, about which I wrote a detailed report to the government, fell under Paragraph 5 of those concessions, which deals with the Mennonites' freedom to organize their own economic administration as needed for the well-being of the Colony. It was necessary now to set forth the impossibility of a single cemetery for the entire Colony.

Suppose the remains of someone who had died had to be transported in pouring rain by a horse drawn conveyance on a slow journey lasting all day over muddy, almost impassable roads, to be buried fifty miles from the place of his demise in the only cemetery available to the Colony. The cemetery problem took months. Finally, the Colony was allowed four cemeteries, instead of only one; and after many discussions and numerous written statements and another interview, on March 30, 1927, with the interim governor, Don Fernando Orozco, we were allowed fifteen burial grounds, until finally, in the end after months and years, this absurd matter came to nothing, and everything was left as it had been originally.

During the interview with the governor on March 30, the business of the Waisenamt was also finally settled, as well as the matter of the vehicle tax. After all the material on road and bridge construction had been dragged out once more, the Colonists were given an exemption from the retroactive vehicle taxes, and the current tax was cut in half. It was further ruled that this levy was not incumbent upon individuals but would rather be paid by the Colony in a round sum agreed upon with the government.

The school problem was serious indeed. Very few Colonists were later aware that even then already in 1927, their schools had been at issue. We will need to come back to this later. Let it suffice here to say that it was possible to silence the school question without creating too much disturbance among the Colonists, even after an order had already been issued to open a Mexican elementary school in the middle of the Colony. Strangely enough, the government drew back from this plan fairly soon. And so, all these storms threatening the Colony eventually blew over without doing serious damage, thanks to the efforts of its leaders.

THE REBELLION OF COLONEL MIGUEL GUTIERREZ

Now something happened that was to have very serious results for the economic well-being of the Colony, although not immediately. Only later did these results become evident when they brought about a crisis that was hard to cope with. We are speaking about the rebellion of Colonel Miguel Gutierrez, who owned land in Bustillos and had until now cultivated it peacefully.

Suddenly a rumor was making the rounds that a new revolution was being hatched, made up of elements that were not in agreement with the coup d'état through which Governor Almeida had been brought down. It was said to be a reaction intended to restore the former, legitimate state of affairs. At least so it was said in the manifesto given out by Colonel Gutierrez, in which, at the same time, the

authorities in the capital were informed that the movement was in no way against the federal government but directed exclusively against those currently in power in the state of Chihuahua.

Everyone was astonished to learn that Colonel Gutierrez was leading this movement. The man was well-known and well-liked and had never appeared to be someone who would be involved in a political adventure. And so, it was assumed, not incorrectly, that others were behind him.

Somehow, the word had leaked out that on June 11 (it was still the year 1927) something was to occur. Apparently, something went wrong; at any rate, two days before the given date, on June 9, the state of Chihuahua was suddenly thrown into turmoil by the announcement that Colonel Gutierrez had issued his manifesto and staged an uprising in Bustillos.

For us in San Antonio, this news released a wave of pure fright, since we had no doubt that the rebellion would strike our town first. For one thing, it was the town closest to Bustillos; for another, San Antonio would be of great importance for the success of the movement, for here were the only two banks in all the Sierra, in other words, the money was here. And in addition, there was the hinterland of the Mennonite Colony, where horses, fodder, and other supplies could be requisitioned according to need.

The fear increased as the first day and night passed and nothing happened. All of San Antonio lay under an incubus, so to speak, holding its breath.

The Mennonites had not become aware of any of this during the first day. We informed them as soon as possible, advising them not to show up in town during the next few days. And so, the place lay as if it had died out. I repeated my former trick and once more concealed our cash in the corn granaries.

A day went by, then another, and nothing happened, so that we began to feel secure again. By the second night, I went to bed so calmly that I followed my old habit and left the door unlocked. At two in the morning, a rough voice roused me out of my sleep. Instinctively, I grabbed the gun under my pillow and jumped out of bed. Two masked figures stood in the room blankets drawn over their faces in the cool of the night.

I recognized the voice of one of them as that of Pedro Jose Melendez, a brother of my employer. He said that all was lost. The word was, he said, that his brother Pantaleon (my employer) was involved in the revolution and that he had had to flee across the US border in the dead of night. His other brother, Ignacio Melendez, had been arrested at midnight. He, too, was suspected of being connected with the revolution. The representative of the government, who had arrived the evening before with the authorization of organizing the defence of San Antonio was the one who had taken Ignacio into custody for the time being.

This government representative was an active, but cautious man, and he was determined to repulse any assault on San Antonio. He had quickly organized a citizens' defense group. Yesterday, a small detachment of federal troops had gotten through with him. No trains were running any longer. The big bridge at Bustillos stood in bright flames.

The man with Pedro was a stranger to me. He told me that on the orders of his superiors, I was to accompany him and Pedro Jose to the main headquarters. We would learn more there.

I was given time to dress. The headquarters were located in the telephone office, where in the pale light of the oil lamps I saw already gathered most of the businessmen of San Antonio, their faces more or less pale with fear. Only my brother, the local pharmacist, leaning against the door frame, his arms crossed, had a defiant look on his face. He was one of those fortunate people who knew no fear. He was also the first who, an hour later when the guards at the door had fallen asleep, stepped over them

and without further ado went home. Following his example, most of the rest of us before long did likewise.

None of us knew what was expected of us here. To judge from the hushed mutterings heard all around, there was a need for funds. Had not Napoleon long ago coined the familiar saying that the first thing that belonged to a war was money, that the second thing was more money, and that the third was still more money? The old Syrian, Narcisco Melik, had been rousted out of his house in his nightshirt. Cold and shivering, he kept himself wrapped in a blanket. A man in a Wild West costume, two pistols hanging from his belt, stepped up to him and said half in jest, half seriously, that he would have to come up with 25,000 pesos; everybody knew that he had money buried at his house.

White as the wall, the tortured Syrian drooped and sagged. "God forbid!" Leo Heimpel talked soothingly to him, assuring him that he needn't take the joke seriously.

When my turn came to be interrogated, I was asked politely and correctly what, if anything, I could reveal about the possible participation of my employer in the revolution, something about which I could to my best knowledge deny knowing anything. When no further questions were asked of me, I considered myself dismissed.

The further strange details about that night are of no importance here. The rebels did not show up.

The next day the money question came up again. Jakob Wiebe made available a considerable sum to the government's representative, for which he received a proper receipt. Then we agreed to close both banks for the time being. The government representative readily approved of this for general security reasons. With the interruption of all railroad traffic, it was impossible to get additional cash reserves from Chihuahua. Among other things, closing the banks for the time being prevented frightened customers from storming them to withdraw their deposits, something that could have resulted in a panic for the banks and the whole business community of San Antonio.

The Colonists conducted themselves calmly in their villages while awaiting developments, until suddenly, after only a few days, the revolution came to a dramatic and unexpected end.

In the first edition of this book, I describe this end in some detail. Today it is enough to say that because of a fateful misunderstanding, the rebellious group and a detachment of government troops suddenly came upon each other between San Antonio and Cusihuiriachi. After a brief clash, the rebels were defeated and set to flight. In the process, Colonel Gutierrez was killed, and his remains were brought to San Antonio in triumph.

And with this the revolution ended.

Since no physician was available, my brother, Hans-Guenter, the local pharmacist, was asked by the mayor to prepare the colonel's body for shipment to Chihuahua. Ignacio Melendez was sent to Chihuahua as a prisoner on the same train that transported the Colonel's remains, to answer for himself there as to his suspected participation in the Gutierrez rebellion. A few days later, after everything had been clarified, he was back in San Antonio, free and at work again in the Melendez enterprises. Soon after that, Balthazar Melendez also returned. He had been on his way to Canada by car but had come back quickly to Chihuahua to take over the management of the Melendez office there. And so, it seemed that things were again taking their normal course.

But it only seemed so. Let us take a look at the results the rebellion that ended so quickly had for our Colonists.

SERIOUS ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

The new wind which had blown across the land with the coming of the Mennonites from Canada, bringing with it the establishment of modern banks in the middle of the Sierra Madre, with its cowboys, transient Indians, pistol-packing rancheros, had at the time brought along something else that until now had been unknown in this far-out region of endless prairies and isolated cornfields, and that was the preoccupation with money.

Like a wildfire, the news spread that Don Pantaleon Melendez was supposed to have participated in the revolution and that he had fled the country. Among the documents removed from the body of Gutierrez were said to have been such as incriminated Melendez, and even though it turned out later that they consisted of no more that a check book from the Melendez bank, the rumor itself was enough to conjure up a crisis that could not be contained.

As could be expected, the generally disturbing effect of this rumor also carried over to the Mennonites, who wanted to have their money. They had already had one bad banking experience in Mexico, when at the beginning of December of 1923, the largest bank in Chihuahua, David S. Russek & Cia., had failed and several hundred thousand pesos had been lost by the Mennonites. Their situation with the Melendez bank was much more serious, as their deposits there at the time of the Gutierrez rebellion amounted to almost a million pesos of badly needed money.

At first it was still possible to restore an outward calm among the Colonists, especially since Pantaleon Melendez, head of the bank was soon able to return to Mexico on his own, and the accusations against him did not materialize. But things were not as they had been before. The Old Colonists were slowly but steadily withdrawing their funds. Although occasionally new deposits were made, they by no means equaled the withdrawals. Added to this, almost no money came from Canada this fall. Whereas until now it had always come regularly, this year it failed to come because of a crop failure.

It was a sign of the strength of the Melendez bank that in such a situation it was able to survive for seven more months. During that time, almost half of the deposits had been withdrawn, and it final got to the point beyond which it was impossible to continue, and the bank had to close.

Because of its great obstinacy, which, although it might seem justified, amounted in this case to impractical mistrust, the Old Colony later threw away the possibility of saving its money in spite of everything. I cannot pass over this incident, which at that time cut so deeply from an economic perspective, without adding that the great loss of funds could have been avoided had the Colonists shown more understanding and at least reasonable confidence. It wasn't really necessary that half a million in capital bitterly needed for the development of the settlement was lost to them and hence to all of San Antonio.

Unfortunately, the Old Colonists allowed themselves to be misled by intrigue, what in the USA is referred to as a "whispering campaign." To their own detriment, they dropped a liquidation plan to which they had already agreed, and as creditors, forfeited the only possibility of saving their money, even if it would have been on a long-term basis.

It was a tragedy which we were forced to observe with a sad heart without being able to do anything about it, and which soon introduced a whole series of hard blows.

Shortly after this, Jakob Wiebe's bank was also unable to carry on, and it, too, closed its counter forever to the settlers, who suffered another great loss. And with this, modern banking methods,

introduced perhaps too suddenly among the Mennonites at their new place of colonization, had for the time being suffered ruin, and it was to take years before banking would again be able to establish itself on firmer ground in San Antonio.

A goodly number of business establishments went under in San Antonio at this time. Even the good old name "San Antonio de los Arenales" ceased officially to exist. In place of the name of the gentle church saint, our town was given the name of the last Aztec emperor, who had gone down in the heroic defense of his land against the Spanish conquerors: Cuauhtemoc.

The revolution of General Gonzales Escobar in 1929, called the Renovadora or the Renewers, did not "renew" anything, but rather worsened considerably the economic conditions of what was now Cuauhtemoc. Added to that was the world-wide depression of those years, causing even more distress.

During this time, our town made its saddest impression in all its history. The signs of deterioration, poverty, and anxiety were everywhere. For the Colony, the stream of money from Canada had dried up, and the means on hand had been used up or become lost. The production of the Colony was always in crisis: either harvests were bad, or, if there was something to harvest, the markets were oversupplied, the prices miserable low.

This went on for a number of years, until the sun came out again; the ice was broken up and the difficult crisis was slowly brought under control, out of which our Colony came poorer in money, to be sure, but richer in a great variety of experiences.

THE GERMAN AMBASSADOR AND HIS WIFE VISIT THE COLONY

To the milestones which at more or less regular intervals mark the path of the Colonists, belongs also an event that took place in 1937. The German ambassador to Mexico, on an official visit to colonies of ethnic Germans, had arranged to spend two days visiting the Mennonite settlement at Cuauhtemoc. It was the first time in twenty-two years that the highest representative of the German Reich in Mexico was looking up the Germans in the state of Chihuahua. It seemed important to the ambassador and rightly so, to let the Mennonites know that there was a warm interest on part of the Germans in their distant pioneering venture.

On a dusty, unfriendly April day, such as is common in this region in the spring, the ambassador and his wife, Baron and Baroness Rudt von Collenberg, accompanied by the German consul at Chihuahua and other representatives of the Germans in the state capital, arrived in Cuauhtemoc to visit the Mennonite villages. The visitors were all able to take an intimate look at the tremendous work of colonization that was being accomplished "way out there," as well as to get a close view into the heart and being of those simple, yet hardy and faithful people of our blood.

We stopped briefly at the home of the administrator of the Manitoba Plan. A couple of boys opened for us first the garden gate and then the door to the house, which the wind, blowing across the steppe, almost tore out of their hands. It was warm inside. The administrator sat at a table, before him a small mirror, near his elbow a cup with a broken handle that was filled with shaving cream and a brush, his face covered with lather. He was just in the act of stretching out the hand that held the razor to begin shaving his cheek.

"Well?" – "Good day to you!"

He did not allow himself to be interrupted, and the first razor stroke went rasping over the stubble on his cheek. My friend, Louis Janss, elbowed me meaningfully.

"Friend Rempel," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder, "I'm bringing you visitors today, rare, important visitors. The Herr Ambassador to Mexico and –"

"So? The ambassador"

Friend Rempel now turned his head a bit after all. Then he gestured an invitation with his razor. "That is nice. Well, then, please, all of you, sit down over there on the bench."

He said it, again looked into his mirror, again ran the razor across his cheek with a deliberate calm, so that we again heard the rasp across the stubble as we sat down. The rest of the shaving procedure now went quickly. Having finished, the administrator folded the razor, put the brush in the cup, dried his face with a towel. Only then did he get up.

"So. I'm finished. Well, then, a hearty welcome to my house and to our colony."

And now there was a moment when two very different but both of them upright men stood facing each other and shook hands: the ambassador, and the representative of the many thousands of the Mennonite Colony, with his staunch German honesty reflecting from his eyes.

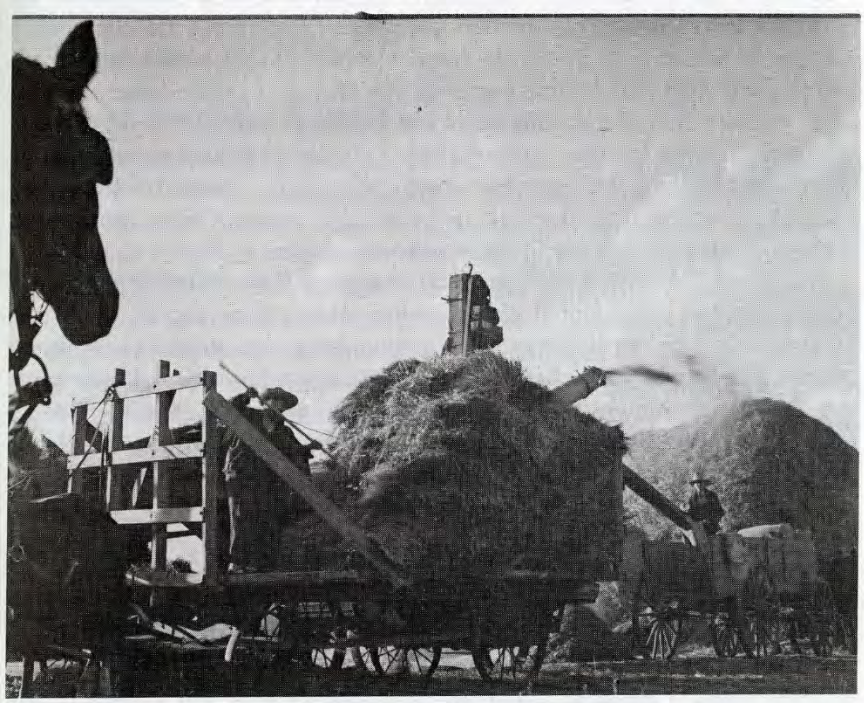
To me this moment seemed symbolic and historical, one in which the Prussian past reached into the Mexican present. Germany and a German ethnic splinter were giving each other their hands in a foreign land, were looking into each other's eyes for the first time in two hundred years. It seemed as if a recognition shimmered through, wanting to say,

"Brother, it's been a long time, but we haven't forgotten each other. God bless you!"

The guest looked over the Colonist's house: the benches against the walls in the living room; the molding lowered from the ceiling with its hooks on which to hang hats; the shiny clean bedrooms with the high-piled featherbeds; the home-made wooden cradle; the kitchen with the large range on which, at the moment, water boiled in large tubs for the weekly baths. The farmer's wife and daughters took in the words of the kind, friendly baroness with a visible mixture of respect, shyness, and enthusiasm as she expressed herself about everything with great sensitivity and understanding.

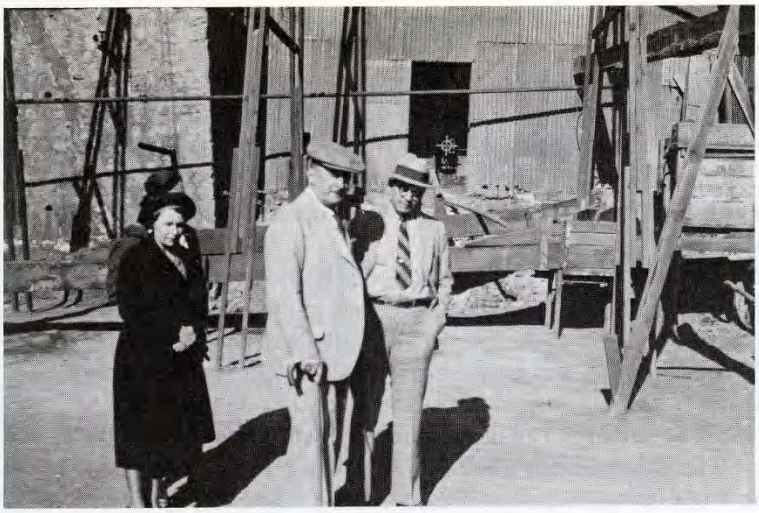
In the evening the ambassador and his wife sat among German farmers and countrymen in Cuauhtemoc at long improvised tables weighed down with hams, sausages, and cheeses, roasted fowl, smoked cold veal, good coarse farm bread, and innumerable bottles of beer, famous in all of Mexico for the high quality of the barley from which it is brewed by brew master Franz Fellner of Chihuahua.

When the tables had been cleared, the ambassador sat for a long time with the farmers and pioneers, smoking his pipe with them, and listening with interest to talk about the struggle to master the soil, about the weather, the cultivation of grain, the markets, prices; about the problems and concerns and hopes of the people who had put down roots here in the Sierra Madre. When his turn came to speak, he talked about home, the German nation of people, about countrymen and colonists in many other lands, whom he had learned to know in the course or his diplomatic career, and about the great joy he felt in having been permitted to spend this day among people of German origin who had migrated to a place so far away.



Dreschmaschinen, Erntewagen, Kornsäcke, Stroh und Spreu und die feierlich fröhliche Arbeit der Bauern.

Foto: F. W. Butterlin



Im April 1937 besuchte der Deutsche Gesandte, Baron Rüdt von Collenberg (Mitte) die Kolonie. (links Frau Schmiedehaus).

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

8. The School

We now come to a sensitive subject, sensitive because the Old Colonist does not like to be lectured on his schools. Well, a lecture is certainly not what is intended here. It is not a matter of

criticizing, but simply one of presenting the facts on the education question as an observer from the outside sees them.

THE SCHOOL DETERMINES THE FATE OF THE COLONY

To avoid giving offense, it would perhaps have been simplest to remain silent on the school question. But that would have been as dishonest as it would have been comfortable, for it would mean simply to conceal one of the most important manifestations of the Old Colony's existence. It would mean further to shove under the table the Old Colonists' most important reason for their long migration and doing so would defeat the historical purpose of this book.

The school has always been of greatest importance in the history of all Mennonites; for the Old Colonists it is absolutely crucial. Nothing exemplifies this so clearly as the emigration out of Canada. If the Mennonites left Russia because they wanted to escape military and state service and a reformation of their schools, then the reason for the migration to Mexico lay in the end only in the relatively light interference by the Canadian government in the school freedoms originally granted them.

As we saw in the first chapter of this book, this interference began with the intention of the government to introduce at first only one hour a day of English instruction in the Mennonite schools, in so far as such instruction had not already been introduced voluntarily. But the Old Colonists resisted this with great stubbornness from the very beginning. As we have seen, rather than letting the devil have their little finger, who would then take the whole hand, they decided to emigrate.

And so, in no other instance was it demonstrated so clearly as in this one how decisively the school question determined the fate of the Old Colony. And in this respect, nothing has changed to this day. If in Canada the requirement of an hour a day of English instruction and the possibility of the slow Anglicization was connected with it was enough for a whole ethnic group to come to the decision to leave, how much more must the dramatic moment be shaping itself when one day in Mexico the hour of decision strikes again because of the school question. That this hour will strike sooner or later is demonstrated on the one hand by history and predicted on the other by the natural course of events, which in time cannot be stopped by any privileges, any document, or anything at all. And what then?

The Mennonite school offers an extraordinarily fertile and rewarding subject for study, one which cannot be treated exhaustively here. However, to gain a clear view of the role that education has played and is still playing in the existence of the Old Colony, we need to glance back into history, even if only very briefly, before going into the present in greater detail.

MENNO SIMONS AND EDUCATION

It is a mistake to assume on the basis of the school training that is customary in the Old Colony today, administered as it is in exactly the same way as it has been for a long, long time, that the Mennonites have always received the same country schooling, without proper, professionally trained teachers and without ever having learned anything but what barely sufficed the farmer to get by passably well in his surroundings. No, such is not the case. Menno Simons himself, the founder of the Mennonite

confession of faith, of whom it is said – also erroneously – that he recommended besides the Word of God only the most necessary training to keep the youth "free of the world and its corrupting influence," in reality thought and acted quite differently.

Menno Simons did not happen to be one of those so numerous religious zealots of his time who, far from always belonging to the educated strata of society, often had only their fiery zeal to substitute for the knowledge they frequently lacked. No, Menno Simons was a highly educated man, a scholar of the highest rank, having acquired all the learning possible at his time to prepare himself for his original profession, that of Catholic priest. He was so gifted, so talented, so adept at writing that, as Ramseyer reports, even his opponents had to admit he possessed an erudition rare for his time.

And it was precisely this erudition, this knowledge, and the outstanding development of both his mind and heart that caused the tiny, scattered congregation at Witmarsum to turn to this man of learning and skill and to call on him to take over the leadership of their small group, with which he then laid the matrix for his later large following.

As far as his concept of how youth should be educated is concerned, we know that he put in the foreground, as obviously belonging there, the teaching and knowledge of the Lord; but otherwise, he insisted so emphatically on good schooling that the Mennonites of his day and in the land of their origin, as well as those who came later, belonged to the most educated layers of society.

And so, the great simplicity of the Old Colony's school system today cannot be traced back to Menno Simons.

THE ORIGIN OF THE OLD COLONY VILLAGE SCHOOL

On the contrary, it can be well established from later history where and when the beginning of today's Old Colony Mennonite school is to be found. Obviously, it stems from a period of deterioration, to be specific, the first decade of the nineteenth century, shortly after the Mennonites settled in Russia. Here the school situation left much to be desired from the very beginning. There were at first other, more immediate and more pressing concerns. The Mennonites needed to get a foothold in the new land, become successful in it, accustom themselves to it and work themselves up economically.

In spite of that, they did not by any means abandon the school question, but rather made an honest effort to see to the education of their youth as circumstances permitted. That was not easy at the beginning. Any Colonist who had finished his schooling in Prussia was called upon to sacrifice enough of his time so that the children of his village would receive at least a makeshift education. At first, the instruction was usually given in private homes and in a very modest manner, until it was possible to build regular schools.

Meanwhile a very bad situation became apparent. As the years and decades passed, those who had brought along a good education from Prussia and had of necessity been the ones to pass it on, soon died out. A new generation of school-trained teachers was not available, and hence the entire intellectual life, not only as it related to the schools, but also to matters of church and religion, sank to a critically low point.

Before long, the Colonists saw the entire administration of their community, including preaching and teaching positions, slip into the hands of a generation which because of lacking or insufficient education was in no way prepared to perform its duties properly.

We confidently ascribe the origin of the Old Colony village school to this period. One has to be satisfied at that time to learn in school only what was most essential. And if today the only textbook in the Colony school (beside the Bible and the catechism) is the so-called ABC Spelling and Reading Book, we are not likely to go astray in assuming that this single textbook may well be a result of that period over hundred years ago, when it was laid down once and for all what is the most essential. The booklet speaks for itself. It presents, compressed as much as possible, what is absolutely necessary in an extraordinarily characteristic way. There are only fourteen pages. It begins with the ABC's and ends with the Lord's Prayer, the confession of faith, and the Ten Commandments.

TEACHERS FROM GERMANY

At that time in Russia it got to a point that discerning men recognized that the neglected deterioration of the school system threatened the healthy development of their people. They considered possible improvements, and these were soon forthcoming in the only manner possible by way of nature and fate. After all, the old home was still there. To be sure it lay far, far away to the west, countless miles, and long years back, but it was still there, nevertheless: the old valley of the Vistula, Prussia, Germany. It lay there in the haze of the past, far behind the mist over the steppe, on the other side of the distant border behind which the sun went down on the horizon in the evening – the German home with its high-gabled cities, the slender spires of its churches, with its universities and schools, and many, many German brothers, of whom certainly one or another would follow the call to Russia in order to help.

And so, the call went out to the German home, and good teachers were brought over from there, who soon effected a tremendous change in the school system of the Mennonites in Russia and introduced a period which is counted among the most brilliant in the intellectual life of all Germans in foreign lands. Still aglow from that time are such names as Tobias Voth, Heinrich Franz, Heinrich Heese, and others. They laid the foundation for a new, more progressive educational system in which flourished the Zentralschulen, the Fortbildungsschulen for teachers, as well as the fundamentally improved village schools. Before long, the German schools and high schools of the Mennonites in Russia enjoyed an excellent reputation, so that many people of the Russian nobility sent their children to them.

And our Old Colonists? They, too, participated in this general improvement of the Mennonite school system, even though they declined on principle to institute the Zentralschulen or any other form of high school. Progress was slow in their isolated villages, but little by little their schools, too, were supplied with teachers who had actually been trained as teachers. And where there were no such teachers, and the old Colonists stayed with the old system of using as instructors people who were believed qualified to teach, even such farmer-teachers were better qualified because of their own better education to pass on what they had learned. As for the minimum program that had been laid down

previously, it probably did not go through any drastic changes, except in so far as what was required to be learned was now taught and learned more correctly and thoroughly, so that even in the simplest village schools, the training received was more effectual and permanent.

For that we still have undeniable proof today, of which the most obvious is that the older the members of the Old Colony in Mexico are, the better and more thoroughly they are educated. The very old, who brought with them the last reflection of the schooling in Russia, most certainly and most consistently demonstrate the best handwriting, the best ability to spell, the best German pronunciation, and generally the best education. The younger the generation today, the greater the loss; and if the tendency continues as new generations appear, let us freely admit that the Colonists will retreat to the educational condition which existed in Russia a hundred years ago, if not to one that is worse.

When the Russian government announced its new educational regulations, they significantly affected primarily the Old Colonists, who declined all reforms. The regulations had a lesser effect on Mennonite groups that were more progressive, and which had long since introduced Russian language study in their schools. The well-known Vereinsschule at Ohrloff, which was founded in 1820 as a higher institution of learning for the training of teachers, also offered Russian language instruction, and Heinrich Heese, one of the competently trained educators from Germany, went at the study of Russian with such zeal that he is said to have been eventually a master teacher of this language.

From the Vereinsschule in Ohrloff, he went in 1840 to the Chortitza colony, where he founded and directed its first Zentralschulen. Soon, there were a substantial number of these secondary schools. They had such a good reputation, as we have already mentioned, that even the children of Russians attended them. When the Russian government issued its new school regulations, which became a fateful issue for the Old Colonists, many of the schools of other Mennonite groups were probably hardly touched by them; they had already introduced the study of Russian, and as far as the rest of their instructional program was concerned, it was equal, if not superior, to that in the Russian elementary schools and high schools.

Then, after the Old Colonists had moved to Canada, a very similar development took place. The Mennonites did not establish in Canada any Zentralschulen organized and taught by German nationals; however, more and more, most of the church groups gave in to the hardly noticeable but unfailing pressure of their English-speaking surroundings, and their schools took on new patterns, modern methods of instruction, and the English language, until they finally became English schools.

It seems that there is no influence under which the German element finds it more difficult to assert itself and its own intellectual life than under the influence of what is English. Nowhere is this more obvious that in the USA, where the great “melting pot” slowly but surely dissolves and devours everything. Or is such not the case? Perhaps it is still too early to make a final judgement, for there may still come a time when some of the elements in the pot will flow through and by each other, refusing to be melted into a single brew. We do not know. But we do know the magnetic power of Anglicization, which has succeeded in causing many hundreds of thousands to adapt themselves to its influence, among them innumerable splinter groups of our German people. The Old Colonists drew back from this magnet when they refused to relent even just a finger’s breadth in the matter of the schools and finally

left Canada to start once more from the beginning in Mexico. And so, their own, their German schools have persevered.

The great question directed at the future is, for how long?

FOR HOW LONG WILL THE FREEDOM OF THE SCHOOLS LAST IN MEXICO?

Has everything gone according to the wishes of the Old Colonists during their first two decades in Mexico? Yes and no. Yes, because to this very day the schools of the Old Colony are still able to function in their old unaltered form. But no is also a correct answer, for storm clouds threatening the existence of the schools have already moved up a number of times. Let us remind ourselves of what we recorded in the second chapter of this book from the diary of our friend David Rempel, describing the first reception of the delegates by the Mexican president, General Obregon.

Already at this point we encountered the first objections to the German schools of the Old Colony. At that time, the president agreed only to grant full school freedoms initially. Later, he is reported to have said, it would be advantageous for the Mennonites to also learn the Spanish language and to adapt their schools to the system prescribed for the country.

With this the president voiced at the very beginning the same opinion which I later heard expressed again and again by a variety of interested parties, an opinion which can be heard today as well by anyone who is willing to hear it. The least that is expected from guests in the land is that with time they will adapt themselves linguistically. Beyond that the Mexican authorities are of the same view as were those of Russia and Canada, who, as time went on, wanted to make actual citizens of the Mennonite foreigners, not only with their own rights, but also subject to all the duties incumbent on the rest of the citizens.

President Obregon allowed himself to be persuaded and granted the school privilege as it had been originally requested. For him there were things to consider which, in the interest of the colonization of the land, were more important than granting or not granting the school privileges. Besides, he was convinced that the Mennonite schools were superior to those of the Mexican rural schools of that time. But will the nation be satisfied forever with what President Obregon thought to be prudent in the year 1921?

THE FIRST ATTACKS ON THE SCHOOL PRIVILEGE

The first answer to this question came in 1927, the year in which the Mexicans, who had been forced to become a people without religion, began to complain because the Mennonites were allowed to keep their churches and to continue their worship services. Complaints were also raised against the Mennonite schools, which seemed to be exempt from Article 3 of the law and not subject to the "socialistic education" legally prescribed for all Mexicans. Already at that time the Mennonite schools came within a hair breadth of being closed. Only the success of prompt efforts to put all possible forces into motion with the government to turn aside the complaints that kept coming in preserved the inviolability of the school privilege.

At any rate, for the Mennonites this reaction from the land they had presently chosen was clear and distinct. And whoever did not hear it in 1927 – many of the settlers had perceived little or nothing of the difficulties recorded in the preceding chapters – would certainly become aware of it eight years later, when for the first time the charges against the Mennonites' school privilege came into heavy focus.

THE CLOSING OF THE SCHOOLS IN 1935

As if by lighting from a cloudless sky, the Colony was struck in May of 1935 by the entirely unexpected closing of all Mennonite schools in Mexico. An inspector came into the Colony, went from school to school, recorded what there was to report concerning classrooms and teaching methods, declared the schools to be illegal, and locked their doors.

In this way, the Old Colony schools lost almost a year, during which the children of school age received no instruction. At Christmastime, while the leaders of the Colony worked without interruption on the reopening of the schools and the return to normalcy, the pupils had to meet secretly with their teachers in private homes to practice at least the songs and verses that customarily belonged to Christmas, and to write notes of Christmas wishes and greetings as they had done since time immemorial.

Commissions from both the colonies of Chihuahua and Durango spent weeks and months at the national capital, trying to correct the situation with the central government. The efforts continued to fail, while the government continued to insist that the Mennonite schools were illegal. Even though in high administrative offices there was a willingness to understand and to be forthcoming, the school authorities remained inflexible, demanding the incorporation of the Mennonite schools under pertinent national laws into the educational system of the rest of the country.

Since their conflict with the agrarians, the Colony had not had to face anything so severe as this threat against their schools. After months of struggling uselessly back and forth, worse almost came to worst. Before me is a copy of a petition directed to the federal government by way the Chihuahua Chamber of Commerce, dated December 18, 1935. It represents one more attempt for a clear, final decision regarding the schools. If it should turn out to be impossible for the government to continue honoring the school privilege expressly documented by President Obregon, the Colonies had only one further request to make: that they be granted an adequate period of time to dismantle the settlements in Mexico and to leave this land together with their children and possessions.

It had come to that. However, this petition became superfluous through a sudden turn in events that could hardly have been hoped for. Two days later, the problem had suddenly been solved. On December 22, 1935, I received the following letter from Administrator Gerhard J. Rempel:

> My dear Mr. Schmiedehaus:
>
> Yesterday our friend Abram Dyck from the village of Gnadenfeld received two telegrams, one from the German consul, <u>Herrn</u> Hugo Natus, which states the

following: “December 20. School privilege acknowledged. Congratulations!” The other is from Johann P. Wall, Patos, Durango, mailed on his way home from Canitas; it reads: “Dec. 20. Coming home with complete success. Schools to be opened immediately. Letter follows.”

Wishing you all the best, I remain your devoted friend,

Gerhard J. Rempel

We all felt as though a stone had rolled from our hearts. In actuality, the minister had issued the following instructions to the state division of education, which we translate word for word:

> Resolution No. 6 – 330 December 19, 1935. Upon the decision of the president, please direct the school inspectors of Chihuahua and Durango to allow the resumption of activities in the schools established by the Mennonite colonies in those states; this action is to be taken in view of the fact that the highest official of the republic has ordered that the agreement with the government of General Obregon made with those concerned must be honored.

Nevertheless, it took some time before the schools could be opened again. In Durango, the subordinate offices of the school administration seem to have been especially stubborn. In Chihuahua, as well, the state authorities did not want to believe at first that their cause was actually lost. I ascertained this personally when, accompanied by my former employer, now Jefe de la Oficina de Hacienda of Chihuahua, Don Pantaleon Melendez, I looked up the state board of directors, only to find that while continuing to keep the Mennonite schools closed for the time being, the board was trying to raise objections to the government order in an attempt to have it rescinded. Finally, a categorical message arrived by telegram from Mexico City, putting an end to all such attempts, so that in January of 1936, the schools could open and stay open.

The school problem had been a dull weight on the Colony, stifling it for eight months. Now it was decided, and the test of the Obregon privileges had once more turned out entirely in favor of the Colonists. And yet…

The events of 1935 had shown that in the long run, Mexico was of a mind no different from that of Russia or Canada, or any other country. It is certainly understandable that every country with its own national life will sooner or later require that ALL its inhabitants become full citizens, with all duties and rights; that no country will tolerate forever privileged strangers with far-reaching, peculiar attitudes, but will endeavor, rather, after allowing such strangers a period of concessions in which to become acclimated, to make of them equal citizens.

Such is the natural course of events, and if until now the span during which the Mennonites have enjoyed their privileges has stretched a long way, we suspect that it will eventually be stretched to its limit as conditions change in the future. We can clearly predict this today. In Russia, the Mennonites were left along for a hundred years, in Canada for only fifty years. In Mexico, the first and almost decisive jolt came after only thirteen years. True, the lightning stroke was deflected for the time being; true, too, a number of years have gone by without further disturbances with regard to the schools. But the Colonists must expect that the question will arise again one day.

As a high government official wrote us some time ago (1948): "Well and good. I am firmly convinced that the Mennonites will not have the least thing to fear for a long, long time as far as their privileges are concerned. Even in the event of universal military conscription, the Mennonites in Mexico will not be affected. There is only one article (of the privileges) that will not hold: the school privilege."

THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THE SCHOOLS

If only the Colonists could exhibit schools not in need of reform! If only, as President Obregon believed, the Old Colony schools were superior to those of Mexico, so that they might serve as examples, as did the Mennonite schools in Russia!

During the last thirty years the Mexican schools have been definitely improved, so that today visible progress has been made. Generally, more attention is being paid to education than in the past, also in distant, outlying rural regions, and the extraordinarily high rate of illiteracy that was the rule until quite recently is rapidly declining.

The Old Colony schools, on the other hand, show no improvement whatsoever. Nor has improvement ever been the intention of the Old Colony, which, with respect to this, has a clear, unequivocal program, namely that the school shall remain as it is.

Good. But, I ask my friends in the Old Colony, have the schools, then, remained as they were? Let us review what the leaders of your Colony stated about your schools in the last petition to the Canadian government before the emigration:

> Our children are trained in our schools in the three main branches of learning: in reading writing and arithmetic. They are trained well, so that they are able to read with understanding, and they are acquainted with religious as well as secular writings; they are able to write legibly and articulately, as well as to figure, so that they can take care of their own business records and keep their own books correctly…The teachers are adequately trained persons of character…

So it was then. But can the Old Colonists still say with conviction, "Our children are well educated?" Which are those secular writings that are mentioned in the petition as still being taught at that time together with religious writings – secular writings that are no longer to be found anywhere, although at the time they were deemed essential for a suitable education? And does there really still exist today an adequately <u>trained</u> teaching staff? Adequate as it was then, during the youth of those who have by now grown old and who had at least enough training so that they were able to write their own petitions to the government; who composed travel reports, such as that of David Rempel, and conceived poetry like that of Johann P. Wall, who, as one of the delegates to South America, communicated through verse with his family at home; and others who wrote with a penmanship and expressed themselves in a form far superior to the average of anything that the younger generation in Mexico is capable of today?

Just what are the conditions in which the Old Colony school of today finds itself? What is happening there? With what is the young Mennonite provided in the way of intellectual and moral tools for the road of life? One will have to admit that it is but little, so as not to have to say much too little.

However, in a matter so important, I do not wish to report only my own observations and express only my own thoughts, but will let a professional speak, whose statements and opinions are likely to carry considerably more weight than my own. I am referring to the former director of the German Oberrealschule [high school] in Mexico City, Herrn Oberstudiendirektor [secondary school headmaster] F.W. Schroeter, who visited the Colony from May 25 to June 1, 1936, for the sole purpose of becoming acquainted with the Old Colony school. After returning to Mexico City, he sketched in a special report a concise but unusually clear picture of this school. The main portion of that report is given below:

> The school building, in which are also found the living quarters of the teacher and his family, does not stand out from other buildings in the village. As are all houses, it is located on the main street. The schoolroom, which is very large, bright, and airy, leaves a very sober impression. The whitewashed walls are bare of any pictures. Beside one or two small chalkboards, one sees only an occasional calendar hanging near the teacher's desk.
>
> The benches, always of a length to accommodate four children, are solid and well maintained. The center aisle separates the boys from the girls. Oddly enough, the lowest grade sits in the rear of the room, while the highest grade has its place directly in front of the teacher's desk.
>
> Instructional aids are not found in any of the schools, nor are they wanted…
>
> The school year consists of six months, instruction being given from November until March, and again in May. During the rest of the year the children are required to work in the fields. The schedule of instruction is from 7:30 to 10:30 a.m. and from 1-4 p.m., five days a week, Monday through Friday. The schedule is the same for all schools.
>
> The children generally begin school at age seven. As I was told by the children themselves, the boys remain in school for seven to eight winters, the girls one or two less, since by then they are needed to help with housekeeping.
>
> All the children have fair complexions and impress one as being very neat and clean. They enter and leave the schoolroom in a quiet, orderly single file. They do not leave boisterously, crowding and pushing each other, or running excitedly, as do our children at home. The Mennonite children head for home very quietly and well-behaved. The girls generally take each other by the hand, forming a line and walking abreast.
>
> All pupils seem very serious. During the school hours, they sit mostly with their hands folded. The girls, when going from their seats to the teacher's desk, lower their heads and usually keep their hands folded even then. If the boys are shy and reserved, the girls are much more so.

Whenever after my visit, I conversed with the teacher outside the schoolroom, the children, left inside remained quiet as a mouse, even though they were unsupervised…They are co-operative and pay close attention.

The teachers, who are always men and who all practice the secondary profession of farmer, are appointed by the church. Their pay is approximately $30 per month, paid in pesos. Half of this salary is levied on the village as a whole; so, for example, every farmer in Burwalde is taxed ½ centavo per acre; the other half of the teacher's salary is paid so much per child (in Burwalde seventy centavos per child per month.) the teacher is paid only for the six months that he teaches. During the other half of the year, he must live on the proceeds from his land. For this reason, the teachers belong to the poorest inhabitants of the village. They have no professional training. Their knowledge hardly exceeds that of their pupils in the highest grades, for after leaving school, they are unable to study further, simply because they do not have the necessary books. One can assume that they may even have forgotten much of what they once learned. As an example, I offer a letter which I received from a teacher after I left the Colony:

> Honored Sir:
>
> Since you were here to visit our school, and you have let yourself be heard that you sent out Free for nothing books and papers. So I ask you sent me the books free thank you in advance! Respectfully,…

The only things of which they have a sure command are their church songs, the catechism, and the Bible. In mental arithmetic they are incapable of making up their own exercises. All the lessons are read from a book, and very quickly. Even during spelling lessons, the teacher constantly depends on his notes.

I wish to add here that every teacher seemed glad to give me permission to visit, even though I always came unannounced. They never appeared embarrassed or disturbed but preserved their rural equanimity as they complied with my wishes when I wanted to observe something in particular in the instruction.

The schedule is the same in all schools. In the morning, the instruction begins with song and prayer. Then follows recitation from the catechism and the Bible. Next come the multiplication tables, then reading, writing, arithmetic. The instruction ends with more song and prayer. Twice a week, and this, too, is the same in all schools, exercises are held in spelling, letter writing, and letter reading.

A great disadvantage is that all grades always have the same subjects at the same time. Never are a portion of the pupils kept busy with writing, figuring, etc., so that the teacher may devote himself that much more closely to others. The methods of instruction are the same in all schools.

The children's strongest performance is in their recitation in unison. Outside of Biblical things, they know almost nothing by heart. The multiplication table is recited almost every day, in a somber voice, as if a prayer is being said. Reading even in the highest grade, is without expression and very monotonous. The general result of the large amount of recitation is that the

children read much too fast. Pronunciation, also that of the teacher, is not free of dialect. At home, they all speak Low German.

Only the catechism and the Bible serve as readers. The basis for the first year of instruction is the ABC Spelling and Reading Book (author, publisher, place and year of publication are not given.) On the first page we find the ABC's; the second and third pages offer exercises in phonetics, and on the fourth page we already find the Lord's Prayer; then on page 5 follows the confession of faith, and on page 6 the Ten Commandments. The entire book consists of only fourteen pages. The only other readers, as already noted, are the catechism and the Bible.

The lowest grades read very poorly. The best thing to be seen was probably the children's penmanship. Skill in arithmetic varied greatly from school to school. There are hardly any books for the subject. In almost all schools, the teacher had written arithmetic exercises on cardboard sheets. As soon as the lesson began, the pupils went to the front to get their exercises from the teacher. Each pupil received a different one. Very little figuring was done on the chalkboard. The highest grade gets to fractions and decimals. The poorest performances I saw poor in these subjects, as I noted from their written notes.

Very disadvantageous is that beginning in the second year, all children must participate in dictation exercises. While dictating, the teacher writes the dictated sentence on the chalkboard purposely making many errors. The result is that the smaller pupils, who cannot write fast enough and are unable to spell correctly, copy the errors from the chalkboard. A sample of a dictated sentence went, " Dieser arme Mann hat beide Arme verloren." [This poor man has lost both arms.] The teacher wrote on the board, "Dieser Arme man hat Beite arme Verloren." Pupils are called upon to step to the board and underline the errors. I had the impression that the teachers were especially proud of this particular exercise. It was demonstrated for me in all the schools I visited. One teacher who dictated the sentence, "Meine Mutter kocht und mein Vater schreibt einen Brief an meine Base und einen solchen an meinen Vetter," wrote on the chalkboard, "mEinE muthe Kogt, Unt MEin vater SchrEibt, einen brifv An mEine Base, und Einen SolchEn An mEinen Fetder." [My mother cooks and my father writes a letter to my girl cousin and one like it to my boy cousin.] In another school, the teacher dictated, "Wir sehen, dass die Voegel nicht saen." [We see that the birds do not sow.] The oldest pupil, age twelve, wrote, "Wir Sehen das die Vegel nicht Sehen." [We see that the birds don't see.] Many errors (as here Vegel for Voegel) are caused by the teacher's dialect.

The best insight into the children's ability of expression and their command of spelling is offered in letters they are assigned to write as exercises. I copied some of them word for word. A girl of eleven writes, "Well, good day dear teacher what shall I write I like just fine to go to school then I must write once we have 5 cows and 4 pigs and 20 chickens." From another girl, also eleven, we got, "Well good day dear teacher will write you a small letter we have 4 horses 3 cows 3 calves nine pigs 30 chickens 28 chicks. and I still like just fine to go to school I go the Sixth winter to school." The teacher of the school from which these letters came gave me finally a letter written by the best girl pupil. It goes, "Well good day dear teacher what shall I write I do

not know much new to write. and I like just fine to go to school and here in this school are 29 girls and 21 boys and I am 12 years 3 months and 4 days old. and I have a new slate pencil and we have 17 horses 4 cows 1 colt 1 heifer 2 cats 1 dog 64 chickens 2 geese 37 chicks." I would like to point out that this sort of letter writing is very common in these schools. I found the same form of address and the same content in two other schools…

The teacher never explains any words during the reading exercises, and I am sure that many words are not understood by the pupils. Nor was there any explanation of the content of what was read…How little attention is paid to content and context was demonstrated during a writing lesson. The children were given sheets on which appeared exactly one line of words, whether it offered a cohesive content or not. The line was, "Fear God, dear child, God the Lord sees and" This line had to be copied eight times in German script and eight times in Latin script.

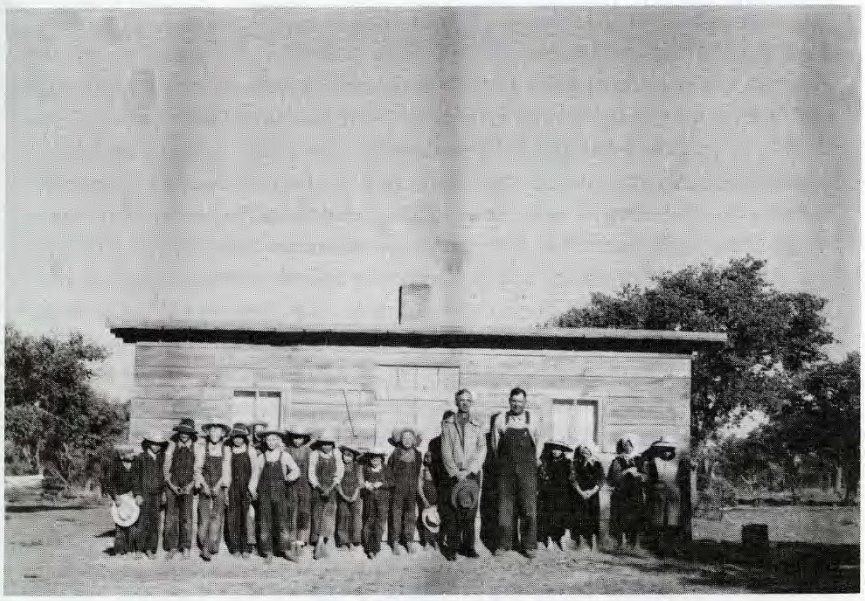
Subjects such as local geography, history, nature studies, drawing, handcrafts, sports and gymnastics are totally missing. There is singing only when church songs are sung at the beginning and again at the end of the school day. The children know no folksongs.

In the rest of his report, Director Schroeter concerns himself with whether and in what way it might be possible to improve instruction in the Old Colony schools, a subject that is its own technical filed. For our purposes, the above basic description of these schools is sufficient. Although coming from an "outsider," it represents the opinions of an informed professional, rather than those of a layman. The report speaks for itself and should, at ay rate, offer some serious food for thought.

D.H. EPP ON THE VALUE OF THE PRIVATE SCHOOL

I shall close this chapter with the following persuasive statement by D.H. Epp, found in his work titled, The Chortitizer Mennonites.

If things are to improve, also with regard to the ailing moral conditions found in our churches in many places, we must, above all, "begin with the children," must make the training of our children our greatest and most sacred duty. The future good of our people depends on the sound education of our children, on our schools. If the schools will strive more and more to accomplish their high calling to be the planting ground for a truly Christian education, one in which heart and mind come into their own in equal measure, then the well-being of the church will blossom splendidly in all directions; but if the schools will fail to measure up to their duty, all the evil forces that undermine the well-being of the church in so many different ways will be given free access. True Christians and good subjects will go forth only from well-directed schools with a properly laid foundation.



Erste primitive Dorfschule in der Neusiedlung von ,,Ojo de la Yegua" anfangs der vierziger Jahre.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Ernst und zuversichtlich, aber vielleicht auch ein wenig besorgt blickt dieses junge Mädchen in die Welt. Es ist die neue Generation, auf deren jungen Schultern die Zukunft der Kolonie einmal ruhen wird.

A – B – C – Schützen in der Dorfschule.

Foto: Dr. Schafmeister

Schulgebäude mit angeschlossener Lehrerwohnung.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Dieses Schulgebäude wurde 1925 in Blumenort, Campo 22 im kanadischen Stil aus Holz erbaut.

Foto: über Jacob A. Enns

Fröhliche Jugend hilft den Segen der Ernte bergen. Es sind Kinder von Isaak I. Dyck aus Osterwick, Campo 18, die dem Vater hilfreich zur Hand gehen.

Foto: F. W. Butterlin

10. Unrest

The schools were open again. Outwardly everything went its accustomed way. But eight months of uncertainty had stirred up great unrest. Many a farmer now "stood with only one foot on his land," as Karl Goetz reported in his award-winning book Brothers Across the Sea after visiting the Colony in November of 1936. Teacher Harder, our chronicler, reports as follows on this state of affairs:

BACK TO CANADA?

Among many of our people, the time during which the schools were closed produced distress and anxiety. Many became disgruntled and restless. As long as we had lived here in apparent peace and security, only very few had been dissatisfied. But when the dear Lord permitted bandit attacks and even murder to be carried out against our people, unrest became widespread, and more and more of them were ready to leave.

Most of them wanted to return to Canada, and many put their Canadian citizenship papers in order. Since some were too poor to do so; there were numerous demands that our leaders take on the task of working out British naturalization, and it got to the point that the elder brought up the issue at a brotherhood meeting, in which the proposed move back to Canada was rejected by those brethren who couldn't see how, after fleeing from one country to another because of our religion and school, we could ask the country from which we had fled to give us help and protection in the event that things went badly for us in the country to which we had fled.

This, however, increased all the more the unrest of those who were dissatisfied, and so they organized their own faction, which kept working to facilitate the move back to Canada. This group gained many adherents, and finally even the elder was persuaded to take the "back to Canada" project in hand.

Then, when on December 7, 1935, while the school question was still in suspense, a meeting of the brotherhood was called for a discussion of the issue, the enthusiasm for the move back to Canada was so great that it seemed inadvisable for anyone to speak against it. The church even sent men to Canada, who crossed the country from west to east, receiving only refusals wherever they went, except in the province of Quebec, the only place where the desired privileges were not categorically denied. Here the authorities agreed to examine the petition for the freedoms and then to inform us by letter of their decision. However, the matter was delayed over a period of two years, and although we had in the meanwhile again achieved our school freedom here in Mexico and had been promised protection from the government against attacks, the desire to return to Canada remained. Finally, after repeated inquiries, the answer came from Quebec that no land was available to immigrants in that province and that the language of the schools there had to be English or French and could not be German.

Those who wanted to go to Canada, however, did not allow this to disconcert them. The efforts that were being made in this direction by church authorities were soon proceeding much

too slowly for them, and so they worked on the project on their own. A number of times men from this group went to Canada but they never accomplished anything. In the summer of 1937, this group once more sent a number of men to Quebec. They returned in December of that year with an abundance of fine promises, although they, too, had actually accomplished nothing more than the response, "You will hear from us." Instead of calming down after conditions in Mexico had improved, the "to Canada" faction increased its agitation. Lists of names were drawn up to show the church what a great number of Colonists desired to return to Canada, and demands were made that the church exercise leadership to get the move to there underway.

Finally, when in the end a direct refusal came from Canada, the effort collapsed, but not by any means the unrest. In March of 1938, several men from the USA came to Cuauhtemoc with fine promises of land and of so-called freedoms in the state of South Dakota. As a result, a South Dakota faction now came into being, working for a migration to this state. But later this fantasy, too, collapsed.

Nothing was gained by all this, but much money was wasted on trips. In the meanwhile, many of our people actually did move back to Canada.

THE PARAGUAY PROJECT

So much for David Harder, whose report deals with the planned and in some instances the actual migration back to Canada. Other projects to undertake entirely new migrations were given serious considerations as well, among them a proposed move to Paraguay. In this country the two Chaco colonies of Menno and Fernheim had been established in recent years, and although extraordinary sacrifices had been required and tremendous difficulties had stood in the way, they had by now established a foothold in this South American land.

Not that their future appeared to be very rosy, at least not as seen from afar. But if Paraguay were to continue taking German immigrants in great numbers, the hope was that with the creation of a block of German colonists, it would be possible to achieve at least an adequate prosperity. At the same time, in comparison to the area where the Old Colonists were now settled, Paraguay was so unfavorable a place that the hearts of many who considered the possibility of going there were heavy with misgivings, and rightly so.

First of all, there were the vast distances from everything they had known until now and were accustomed to in western civilization. It took days to get to a railway station, or even just to a very modest river port far out in the bush, which first of all had to be cleared away before the land could be prepared for cultivation. Then there was the climate, incomparably less favorable than what they were used to in the state of Chihuahua, where the European was able to do his own work comfortably all the year round without having to hire native help. And to be considered were the questionable markets for farm products in Paraguay, and the plagues indigenous to this far away semi tropical land, which, on top of everything else, was at the present time a battle ground over which Paraguay and Bolivia were fighting for possession.

All the greater, of course, was the admiration deserved by the brave Chaco pioneers, who, despite such conditions, had not been frightened into retreat, but had succeeded in establishing their by now world renowned settlement where others would have despaired from the very beginning.

It could be said of the "Chaco faction" that here again were people who were ready to take upon themselves all the sacrifices necessary to reestablish themselves in a new land in order to provide security and stability for their own German schools. For the school was again the only issue. Yes, the great recent struggle for it had been won as if by a miracle, but there was reason enough to doubt that the period of peace would last for long, especially since in the settlements of Durango and Chihuahua, there was for a long time no lack of local attempts to raise new objections against the Mennonite schools.

The Colonists who favored going to the Chaco were of notably stronger character and greater sincerity than those who had applied all their energies to move back to Canada, a move the Chaco-bent colonists saw as a sign of weakness. They could not reconcile with their conscience going back to a country they had left for good reasons. If in Canada they had refused to accept English in their schools, going back there now would be nothing but capitulation. If at that time they had refused as a violation of their old principles the subjection of themselves and their children to new official requirements, then it was incumbent upon them to refuse to do so today as well and not to give up the preservation of their German essence, to which they had clung for two hundred years, carrying it with them from land to land, from continent to continent as their holy heritage and most precious possession.

If they did have to move on, then never back to Canada. And so the aspirations of the Chaco faction were entirely in earnest and worthy of recognition, for the hope of this group was to find on the basis of extensive privileges granted by the government of Paraguay a place where they would be able to preserve their German school, and with it their German language as well, for a long, long time.

But that had also been their hope when they had migrated to Mexico, and many now raised the question – and by no means without reason – as to who could guarantee that after a few years, the same thing would not happen in Paraguay as what seemed to be happening in Mexico.

For the first time the voices of such were heard who no longer believed in the possibility of retaining the old freedoms for any great length of time in any country. At best there would be a grace period, but in the end every government would require what the Russian government had called for after a hundred years, the Canadian after fifty, and what the Mexican government was apparently getting ready to require after a bit more than thirteen years.

And so, the Old Colonists racked their brains about what was to happen now. True, at the moment things weren't too bad. For the time being the Mexican government was conceding the freedom of the school, and for this the Old Colonists were thankful to their host country and willing to give it their best, all their diligence, their unquestionable obedience, so as to demonstrate that it had not opened its doors to such as were unworthy; that it was not dealing with an ungrateful people. They wanted to do their honest share in helping Mexico go forward.

But secretly they were worried and asked themselves, how much longer? And then where to? And yet, what was the use of worrying? A satisfactory answer to their question was today impossible. It had to be left to God and the future.

THE RETURNEES TO CANADA BECOME RETURNEES TO MEXICO

And now one year followed another without disturbances. The Old Colonists were glad to find their way back to a feeling of security and wanted to assume that the danger was past, and things would remain for a long time as they had been promised by the privileges.

During these years there were also economic improvements. The prudent elements that had been in favor of staying in Mexico until all patience and means at their disposal had been exhausted in trying to get the government to allow the schools to open again had been proven right. Soon this also had to be admitted by those who had gone back to Canada during the restless, critical period, and in the course of time, there had been many of them.

Obviously, among them, too, there were very earnest people, who had decided to return to Canada after serious considerations, based on their own well-founded concerns and deliberations. However, upon their arrival in Canada, they did not at all find there what they had once been accustomed to. Times had not gotten any better. And it is understandable that when World War II broke out in 1939, many of them turned around and eagerly and hopefully headed back south a second time.

As time passed, one after another Old Colony family came back to Mexico. Many did not succeed in getting across the Rio Grande a second time and had to turn back in disappointment. For a majority, however, it was possible to come back to Mexico in one way or another. A large number did so on a visitor's visa, which ran out in six months. It had to be renewed and was renewed may times over. Finally, the administration of the Colony took this problem in hand. In November of 1940, I accompanied Administrator Gerhard J. Rempel and preacher Abram Duck to Chihuahua to see the governor about arranging permanent immigration status for the three hundred Colonists in question. He gave his approval in a most accommodating manner, so that the authorities again allowed these people permanent residence in Mexico.

COSTA RICA MAKES AN OFFER

With all this, the question of a further migration had died out. For years there had been no talk of moving. When in October of 1938, a consular mission from Costa Rica visited the Old colonists, and, declaring its praise for them, made an offer of land, the answer of the spokesman for the Old Colonists, as later reported by the head consul of the mission, was that "they were very satisfied in Mexico; no one was interfering in the affairs of the colony, and 'minor' misunderstandings and difficulties had always been resolved satisfactorily."

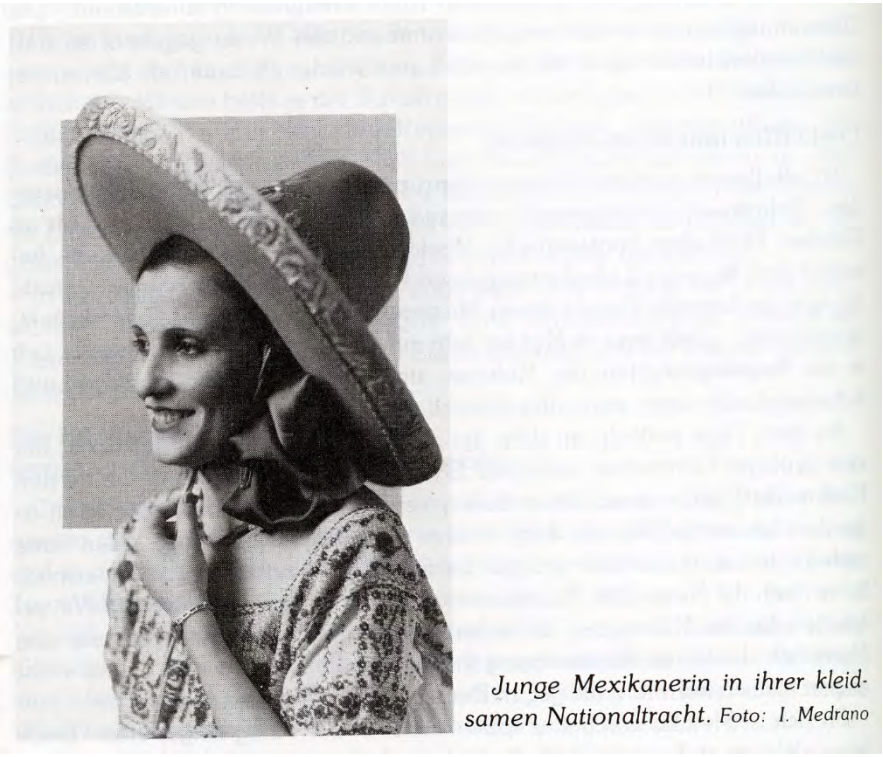
On the day World War II broke out to shake up and plague once more an entire generation of restless citizens of the earth to the very depth of their being, the last wish anywhere among the Old Colonists was to migrate further or to go back to Canada died out. There was now more reason than ever to be satisfied with the land in which they now lived, for the neutrality of Mexico made possible the further undisturbed and unburdened work of the Colonists without that bitterness and the hazards which

could not be spared all those people of German descent in all the lands that were joined in their war against Germany.

It is not saying too much that when Mexico did enter the war three years later, the Colonists hardly took notice. Just as various revolutions had passed them by without noticeably affecting them, so now World War II raged outside, involving also the Colonists' host country, but not in the least disturbing their peace and old, accustomed ways.

Obviously, the grace of God ruled over these people, who had found a home of peace in the distant Sierra Madre, in the wonderland of Mexico.

They certainly had a superabundance of reasons to be content in the land they had chosen.



Junge Mexikanerin in ihrer kleidsamen Nationaltracht. Foto: I. Medrano

11. Life and Activity in the Old Colony

This chapter is to deal with those things about our Old Colony people that undoubtedly interest the reader the most: their way and manner of life, their customs and practices, their character and outlook on the world, their work and domestic life. All that makes for a broad subject, difficult to crowd into a limited discussion. I could make it easy for myself and let others speak who have reported on the Colony, some very favorably and appealingly, others very sternly and with inflexible reproof. But in such reports, something is often missing. Those that are overly favorable lack accuracy and thoroughness, whereas critical evaluations often fall short in understanding and fairness. In only a very few of the reports known to me did the authors limit themselves simply to reporting. For the most part they drew conclusions and expressed judgements, which, based on a more or less short visit to the

Colony, could hit upon the right thing in only a limited way, even with the sharpest talent for observation.

A DRIVE TO CUAUHTEMOC AND THE COLONY

So, I would like to do with every single one of my readers what I have been privileged to do with so many of my friends and countrymen who found their way to our distant region: I would like to invite you to step into my car and drive out with me to these people of our blood.

First, we drive through the desert, the thornbush landscape that lies flat around Chihuahua, then into the hills of the Sierra Madre, on a winding, steadily rising highway, up, up, until, not far from Cuauhtemoc, we are able to look down upon the giant valley of Bustillos, with its spread-out laguna stretching into the distance, at its back the mighty rising ramp of the elongated copper mountain. Here the whole landscape has suddenly changed: this is the prairie, the steppe of the high valley.

From here the view seems to sweep into infinity, into the vast valley, to the east, the north, the west, in front of us, around us, behind us, mile upon endless mile. To the north lie the Mennonite villages. From here they look like something put together out of a toy box. Far off in the distance their corrugated metal roofs and long-legged American windmills flash in the sun and the clear mountain air. Waldheim, Blumenthal, Neuenberg, Blumenort, Gnadenthal, Gnadenfeld, Schoenwiese, Osterwick…Village after village is distinctly recognizable from here. Those lying farther north disappear in the distant haze.

And there, almost within reach of our hand, it seems, lies Cuauhtemoc, the former San Antonio de los Arenales, railroad junction and trading center of the surrounding steppe and mountain areas, the "Stadt" of the Mennonites.

It is by no means any longer that lonesome cattle-loading place of the year 1922, at whose bleak station the first Mennonite trains came to a stop. The far outlying Wild West outpost to which I moved here in 1923 has long since become a place of importance. It is still rough way out here; one still feels oneself to be at the edge of civilization. But today the Mennonites are quite right when they speak of it as their "city". Actually, Cuauhtemoc has long since become its own municipo, in other words, an urban district. But in reality, it is still the same sandy, dust-blown hill that it has been from time immemorial and to which the place used to owe its so much more suitable name, San Antonio de los Arenales (San Antonio of the sandhills,) than the one by which it is known today: Cuauhtemoc.

At one time every child knew the holy Antonius. As for the "sand hills," that was understood even by the simplest of the simple. But then, when the churches were closed and the saints became old-fashioned, the populace was forced to accept that the place should henceforth be named Cuauhtemoc, the correct spelling of which even today keeps many who need to write that name on a war footing with it. The railroad refused for two years to accept the new name, and kept San Antonio on the station sign, until the government spoke a direct order and forced the railroad company to paint the Spanish saint out of the sign and put the Indian hero in its place.

THE TYPICAL VILLAGE

We leave Cuauhtemoc and are again on the flat, endless prairie, that is, on what still remains of it here since the plow of the Colonists broke up the wild landscape far and wide and took it under cultivation. The roads are good and level, and in no more that ten minutes, we are in the first village, Blumenort.

It is typical of all the others, and since the villages in the settlement are so much alike, one must know them well to find one's way around in them. Every village is bisected by a broad street; the individual properties are lined up on either side, with the land belonging to each property behind it. The village is the same as the one that stood on the banks of the Chortitza in Russia a hundred years ago, except that there the trees had grown taller and the gardens were even more sumptuous than here on the Mexican highland, with its much scantier soil and much more modest water supply. But that is, in the long run, only a question of time. In Mexico, too, there are already villages in which the trees reach just as high as they did in Russia, as, for example, in Rosenfeld, where the high poplars stand lusciously green and the gardens flourish magnificently.

Every house stands away from the street behind such a garden, in which the women grow vegetables, flowers, and fruit trees. Here it looks as it did at home in Germany whenever we went out into the country to visit my aunt or grandmother. There are long beds of strawberries; the grapevine climbs up on pole and lathe; the sunflower, whose roasted kernels are eaten by the Colonists with great relish, turns its face of yellow gold to the light. Here we find –God knows – real gooseberries and currants and the familiar raspberry hedges and blackberries as black as crows. Again and again one must forcefully remind oneself that this is Mexico; that the prairie stretches away on all sides; that beyond it are the desert and the mountains; that right next to this German island, the cacti of the wasteland grow, the thorny mesquite, the prickly agave; and that the birdcall from the white-blue sky above is the cry of a vulture.

WATER is the magic word. Water is allotted to this dry landscape only during the rainy season, except for rare, exceedingly meager showers in winter and spring. Modern windmills or gasoline-powered pumps bring it up from the ground, supply the means for irrigating today's blossoming gardens. It flows through efficient water lines in houses and barns.

ON THE FARMYARD

The tidy buildings and yard are laid out practically. Houses, farm sheds, barns, baking ovens, and the well, usually also the work or machine shop are situated around the yard, which is entered by a driveway from the village street. Usually the houses, like those on our farms in lower Saxony, are connected under a single roof with the barn.

The Colonists have real, proper barns, like ours at home in Germany. For a long time, this was something new for the rancheros living in the surrounding areas, who knew nothing of the kind. They drove their cattle into open corrals at night. But actual houses for horses and cows, swine and sheep? With feeding cribs, stalls, and straw litter, concrete gutters and running water? And the horses were

actually groomed daily with currycomb and brush? Obviously, the Mennonites treated their horses no worse than people.

And that certainly is as it should be on a proper farm. What splendid, well-nourished and spirited animals those are, often of a large, even the largest Belgian breed, as one never gets to see them otherwise anywhere in Mexico, except, perhaps, in the advertising pictures of the local breweries. Or, also, light but long-stepping trotters, which pull the small "buggy" like a toy and quickly take the hurried head of the farm from village to village or to the city. Those faithful four-legged work comrades of the Colonists justly deserve the careful attention and affection which they receive in such generous portion from their masters.

Also, the rest of the livestock – cows, swine, chicken, ducks, geese – leave an impression of being well taken care of and have their orderly place on the farm. At night, the chickens do not roost in wooden crates, as they customarily do in this land, balancing at a man's height on a post or sawed-off tree trunk so that the coyotes can't get to them; here they are sheltered, rather, in proper henhouses and reward the care and abundant feed they receive by an industrious production of eggs.

Some years ago, the Mennonites went over to so-called diversified farming, after having attempted at first only field cultivation. Their income has risen steadily since they made this change. Dairies and cheese factories now provide for a sure disposal of milk. Today, butter, cheese, eggs, lard, hams and bacon provide a steady income.

The Wiebe brothers built up a very nice business in Rosenthal, an excellently organized cheese factory combined with a butcher shop. The David Redekop Firm had branch establishments in various locations in the settlement for the buying of milk and eggs and the manufacture and shipment of cheese. Isaac Dyck from Osterwick set up a chicken farm equipped with modern brooders. Blatz and Martens and others produced meat and sausage products, shipping them as far as the national capital, 2000 kilometers farther south through Mexico.

THE HOUSE

The world clock seems to have been set back a few centuries as soon as we enter the houses. On a spotless, polished floor are mirrored the traditional ancestral furnishings: simple chairs and wooden benches, or sofas with curved backs; glistening, mostly built-in china cabinets enclosing colorful porcelain; wooden beds stacked high with down pillows neatly encased in flowered slips, the riches and pride of the housewife. Contrary to the otherwise strictly observed prohibition of anything bright and colorful, the furniture is frequently painted red or yellow, the floor also yellow, the windowpanes often a light blue that is, unless an unpretentious brown is preferred after all.

Indispensable to the industrious housewife is the sewing machine. She wastes nothing. Skilled fingers make use even of scraps and rags, which are practically patched together to make chequered quilts, floor mats, or bedside rugs.

Pictures and other ornamental objects are missing entirely. Instead, there are calendars on the wall, preferably with giant numbers, since the Old Colony people are frequently afflicted with poor eyesight as a result of trachoma, in some instances brought along from Russia.

Great-grandfather's "Russian" country clock with its shiny brass weights ticks comfortably on the wall, "Russian" because over a hundred years ago an ancestor brought it along from Russia to Canada. There are actually quite a few veterans among these clocks that date back to Prussia, as well as Russia, and so go back to the time of Frederick II and Catherine the Great. Among the first of the clocks manufactured in Russia at the time are, although rarely seen today, some very interesting specimens. The faces are cut out in the Russian style in an egg-shaped oval, with perforations and indentations at the top in a pattern that simulates a crown. They are painted black, and on them the Roman numerals in yellow; a few embellishments are also painted in yellow, or sometimes in red. These old faces were seldom restored in their original, outmoded form when they faded or slowly fell victim to the ravages of time. The clocks remained the same, only the face was changed, replaced by one that was simpler and brighter, somewhat in the style of our well-known kitchen clocks.

Despite the lack of decorative finery, the interior of the Old Colony house leaves an impression of contentment and friendly hominess. The reason for this is the breath of tradition and neatness everything in it exudes: the small windows with the bright, clean curtains, in front of them on the sill beautiful potted plants, fuchsias with their burning "flying hearts," and the "busy Lieschen" and "busy Jakob" begonias; next to them cacti and the delicate stems of green asparagus plants and ferns.

I find it incomprehensible that some who have reported on the Colony have found it possible to say that there is nothing at all to brighten the dull rooms; that no flowers, no vases, at most only an occasional kitschy clay figure is to be seen. It is true that a farm woman is likely to place a piece of kitsch here and there in her china cabinet or on the mantlepiece, but not flowers? The fact is that there is hardly a windowsill on which flowers are not displayed where a caring housewife or attentive child is not nurturing and cherishing them as one cares for house pets that bring gayety and friendliness into the house. The eyeglasses of those observers who have seen nothing of all this must be dark indeed. Most likely they also did not notice the canary bird, whose bright, happy song warbles through so many a Colonist's house.

HOSPITALITY

And there is something else that is conspicuously refuted, although it has crept into certain reports and called forth wrong impressions: the assertion that the Mennonites show no hospitality to strangers and simply lock their doors to tired wayfarers traveling through.

Well, let it be known that if there is any place in Mexico where yard gates and house doors are <u>not</u> locked and windows are <u>not</u> protected by prison-like bars, that place is the Mennonite Colony.

Never will it occur to the Mennonite farmer to deny someone hospitality. He cannot be anything but hospitable. For one thing, hospitality is a part of his tradition. For another, it is obligatory in the conditions that surround him. There are no hotels or inns in the villages. Where is one who is traveling through to stay overnight if not with the farmer? Because of the long distances, it is often impossible to go as far as the city at night, and whoever has business in the Colony, or even farther out, must at one time or another spend the night in one of the villages.

And so, the Old Colony people are for the most part well-prepared for unannounced guests. The bench or the sofa in the living room can be pulled out and converted into a double bed. So, if we can't finish with our visit in the Colony today, the farmer will be glad to let us sleep under his roof in his living room, even if he doesn't know us at all, and even if we were to be nothing more to him than rude strangers, who, on top of everything else, ask a lot of suspicious questions, snoop around, and would like, if possible, to photograph everything.

In the meantime, the farmer invites us into the kitchen, which usually also serves as the dining room. Here are located the sturdy iron cookstove, a table and benches, a water container and all kinds of utensils. We are asked to sit down and are served. And, God knows, we are not served badly. Frying eggs and bacon crackle in the frying pan. Smoked meat is brought to the table, in addition, a plate of fried sausages. Later there are waffles with plum jam, and with everything the wonderful homemade bread, white or dark, and the best butter and fresh cheese, and as may cups of coffee as we care to drink.

Even on the question of food, many critics have found it impossible to deny themselves the pleasure of criticizing the Mennonites in their role as hosts. So, it is often said that they do not know how to live; that their food is dull, always the same, and often unhealthful; that these farm women understand nothing about those skills in the kitchen for which those housewives are noted whose larders are filled with jar upon jar of canned staples and delicacies, from canned meats and vegetables to jellies and fruit preserves. The Mennonite household, they say, offers mostly sauerkraut and dill pickles.

Dear reader, above all, dear critic: in the first place, this is all exaggeration, and secondly, in this too, tradition is the determining and explanatory factor. Our Colonists are pioneers. For hundreds of years, they have found themselves at the farthest outpost, at the edge and often outside of civilization. They have struggled with the soil, the weather, and the wilderness, and have had to work so hard that they have had no time or opportunity to busy themselves any more than necessary with secondary matters, and have in the meanwhile, perhaps, often remained unconcerned about the culinary niceties of our time, possible overlooking the undeniably practical value of canning apparatus.

The Colonist, too, being in this respect basically no different from other farmers, know little or nothing about calories and vitamins. But that he lives an unhealthy life because of this is a fairy tale. He eats the simple, hearty, and in itself richly sufficient and varied fare of the farmer, which is provided him according to season by his land and garden, and which does not become more objectionable or unhealthful for lack of the blessings of canning equipment and so many of the other adjuncts that seem useful and pleasant <u>to us</u>.

That beyond this, much could and should happen to supply especially the children with a diet that is more appropriate and more adapted to the new land on which the Colonists have settled is another matter, one that is open to discussion; but, let the discussion be reserved for such as understand something about the problem.

"Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, and His mercy endures forever. Amen."

A short prayer. Our meal is finished and with the thanks that was due, we are excused, for neither the Old Colonist, nor his much too modest wife waits for the guest to express his thanks for having been received in a friendly manner. Rather it is the host and the hostess who express their thanks for having been honored by the guest's presence and who express the wish that he may come again.

And that is not just empty talk, or hollow social custom, as we are used to it elsewhere in our world, in which hypocrisy plays such a large role. For that the Mennonite is too honest. For him, it is not written that the purpose of language is to conceal thoughts. What he says he means. May, above all, those take this into better account who report that hospitality and the courtesy connected with it do not exist in the Colony.

We are not actually finished in the house of our hosts. The large chests in the living and bedrooms, with their brass mountings and large Spitzwegian fairytalelike keys have aroused our curiosity. What all may be inside them? But we don't want to put the patience of our hosts to too great a test, and so we take our leave and drive on, along the broad village street, past the gardens and the properties, past the last house, where the prairie, with it farm and grazing land, begins again, and on until we reach the next village. Here we turn into the yard of Johann Thiessen, in the village of Hamburg.

VISITING THE JOHANN THIESSENS IN HAMBURG

The farmer looks young and congenial. We meet his wife in the middle of those many varied and never-ending activities that are her life, which knows no holidays or recreation. The man's work lasts from sunup to sundown, but, as the saying goes, the woman's work is never done. The farmer shakes our hands and invites us inside. His wife follows us with her youngest on her arm. Inside something flits through the doors, of which we manage to glimpse only flying skirts. We hear rustling and low talk in the adjoining room, and after a short time, so unbelievably short that it might well be called to the attention of many a young lady in our society, the three daughters of the house present themselves in the living room. Even the oldest is hardly more than a child. They are all three picture-pretty, blond, rosy, healthy, without cosmetics such as powder and lipstick; their hair is comelily parted down the middle, and they are shiny clean from head to naked feet.

I am reminded of the romantic description given by a high Central American government official who paid the Colony a visit in the interest of possibly establishing a like settlement in his own country. "How quiet their women are, and how beautiful!" this man wrote. "They open up like our poppies at home, let their blond hair blow in the wind as they look straight ahead, smiling at the visitor…" All of that is poetic license. The loose, blowing hair, the easy smile are figments of the imagination, but the thought gives evidence of a high-minded inspiration.

In great haste, the Thiessen daughters have been to the large chest and have exchanged their everyday housedresses for holiday wear. And so, we've had a look after all into the ancestral chest, which contains everything in the way of clothing that is owned by the family.

ETHNIC COSTUMES OF THE OLD COLONY PEOPLE

The Old Colony people wear their own ethnic costumes. That these conform entirely to their strict religious sect goes without saying. For this reason, the costumes are neither picturesque nor beautiful. Rather, they conceal what is naturally graceful and charming. Humbleness, the fear of God, and the idea of penance rule the form of dress, even at the cost of practicability, for which the Old

Colonists otherwise have so great an understanding. Seeing these people walking in their gardens on Sunday afternoon, one easily gets the impression of religious pilgrims walking around in penitential garb. This is most striking with the women. Almost anywhere else in the world, women eagerly make the best use, particularly on holidays, of their most inherent right to make themselves as attractive as contemporary circumstances permit, so as to portray themselves to their best advantage. Such is by no means the case with the Old Colony women.

Custom demands that they appear modest, if not unbecoming, so as to please God and not to cause any sinful thoughts to arise. They are all dressed in the same way, fixed in a uniform hundreds of years old, the uncompromising austerity of which leaves any feminine fantasy and talent in dressing only the most modest latitude. Legs, ankles, arms and throat, even the head, must be covered. Long skirts fastened just below the bosom fall down in wide folds to the points of the feet. Over this, they wear an antiquated short blouse; on their head, a shawl covers their smoothly combed-down hair, which is sternly parted in the middle. Besides the shawl, a married woman regularly wears a black cap with a small hood, of a type still found here and there on photographs of grandmother or great-grandmother. The old German saying that when a woman marries, she "comes under the hood [Haube]" applies literally as well as symbolically to the Old Colony bride. When she goes out in public, and often also in the house, she wears her shawl over the cap.

With married women, the whole makeup, from shawl to shoes, is either black or some other acceptable dark color, such as dark gray, dark blue, green or brown. A couple of embroidered little flowers on the shawl and inconspicuous patterns on the dress are permitted. The color of the dress worn by a woman of the Old Colony represents one of the very few choices left to her personal taste, and it seems to me that this breach in an otherwise rigid wall of custom and tradition is becoming larger. One sees much more color today than formerly; this is especially noticeable in children's clothing. Although the costume of young girls is almost as severe as that of mature women, many of them show up today in bright red.

In girls' clothing, too, any suggestion of the figure is strictly avoided. However, the unmarried are permitted brighter dresses, mostly in gray patterns, but also in flowered cotton. They wear white or brightly colored shawls and aprons, whereas those of the married women are, of course, black, or at least dark, as the rest of the costume.

The female hairstyle is the same among the young and old: the straight part in the middle and the tightly wound braids from the back of the head. Little girls are sometimes permitted to let their shawls slide off their heads and rest on their necks, or they may even take them off and leave their small heads free to the light and air. But otherwise, the manner of dress is the same for all, for grown-ups as for children, from great-grandmothers down to the smallest tyke, barely able to stand on her own feet. However praiseworthy ethnic and traditional costuming may be, for the Mennonite female it remains an uncompromising and obligatory mode of dress, which she is obligated to wear without variation from the cradle to the grave.

With men, the original clothing style has been less obviously preserved, primarily because of economic considerations. Sturdy black material costs money, and to the genuine Old Colonist, any expenditure that can be avoided is an abomination. Fundamentally, everything is for him <u>val tu duer</u>

[much too expensive], and so he is justified in looking for cheaper, and at the same time more functional clothes; no one is about to assert that the black suit is particularly suited for field work. And so, for weekdays, the Old Colony men have come upon the less than handsome, but practical overalls; these are exchanged on Sunday, however, for the old black costumes of the kind the fathers brought along, or, at least, for a dark suit.

Here, too, the younger generation is noticeably moving away from tradition; the young fellows, particularly those that are unmarried, are very often seen today in light gray, green, or brown suits of a more modern cut.

The traditional men's garb consists of a high-buttoned vest and jacket, the latter single breasted and cut short. Head covering consists of a dark sailor's cap or a broad-brimmed black hat. In sunny Mexico, the locally worn large straw hat is preferred at work in the field. The women, too, like to wear a straw hat over their shawls. Men are not permitted to wear neckties, rings, or watch chains except such chains as are woven from black horsehair. The simplest substitute for a watch chain is a black shoelace.

The Old Colony man wears neither a full beard nor a moustache but keeps his face cleanly shaven and in so doing throws one more offensive stone in the way of his many critics. Strange that humanity should excite itself over so paltry a matter as the beard of the so-called lord of creation. And yet it has done so from the beginning, inventing rules and styles for the beard and often passing judgement over what is done about this external, hotly fought-over feature.

Would it be better if the Old Colony male wore a beard instead of shaving? Would he then be spared criticism and be left in peace? We need only to look at the Holdeman people, of whom there are also a number in Mexico, and who make up their denomination within Mennonitism. Their men, do, in fact, wear mighty, full beards and say, "How is the dear Lord to distinguish you if you don't wear a beard?"

And so, is everyone satisfied with these people? Not at all. They, in turn, are accused of going around like the embodiments of patriarchs and Santa Claus. Their critics can't find enough ludicrous descriptions to suggest that these peculiar people in the beard are strange eccentrics because of their beard. For some people, nothing, absolutely nothing can be done right. Intolerance over the most insignificant things in life celebrates its triumph again and again.

THE INTERNAL ORGANIZATION OF THE COLONY

The large chest in the living room is closed again; the mighty key has been turned to secure it. We have taken leave of our friend Thiessen and his family and are once more on our way. Far into the distance, the villages and the land of the settlers stretch out in every direction. A drainage ditch separates the Manitoba and Swift Current colonies, the two parts into which the settlement is divided for organizational reasons, as we pointed out in Chapter 2.

Each of these divisions has as its religious head, an Aeltester [elder], and, as a leader of worldly affairs, a Vorsteher [administrator]. Every village has a Schulzen [mayor], who is under the administrator and who is responsible for order and for everything else pertaining to the village. The

highest authority is, of course, the church. The entire government of this small society is strongly theocratic. Important problems are taken under submission by the so-called Bruderversmmlung [brotherhood assembly]. The work in connection with this is carried out by the administrators and the confidantes. Important decisions without the sanction of the preachers and elders would be unthinkable.

Within this framework belongs also the institution known in the Manitoba Colony as the Reinlaender Waisenamt and in the Swift Current Colony as the Bergthaler Waisenamt. The Waisenamt has already been mentioned. It is not concerned with a school or a home for orphans, but is, rather an extraordinarily important organization of a purely economic character, which works hand in hand with the administrators and the church in the management of the Colony. It is a kind of bank undertaking that manages money and functions, especially to administrate the inheritances of widows and orphans. It preserves the legacies of minor children until they become of age, undertakes auctions of testators' estates, and regulates all other inheritance matters. The institution manages in part substantial sums of money that are applied to the well-being of the Colony, chiefly in the form of interest-bearing loans to the settlers themselves, including to such as are without means and who are given in this manner an opportunity to work themselves up.

Belonging entirely to the realm of fable is the widespread notion that the organization of the Mennonites is, so to speak, communistic, or, at least, as is often added by way of explanation, certainly idealistically communistic. Nonsense! One suspects in such cases that someone has heard some talk about the Mennonite "Bruderhof" which does not in any way belong to our discussion but refers, rather, to the Hutterian Brethren, another Mennonite sect. It is in this way, it seems, that such indefensible ideas have come into being, with which a "well read" and –I freely admit it – academic visitor surprised me again recently by saying, "But it is common knowledge that individual Mennonites do not own anything. All property belongs to the church. The individual does not cultivate and work the soil as a free farmer, but in the manner of a farm hand, perhaps like a vassal of the Middle Ages. Every village turns over the yield of the harvest to the mayor, who turns it over to the church, and in the end the church sells everything and divides the proceeds in measured proportions."

That is "common knowledge?" Well, then it is certainly time to learn otherwise. And so, I once more confirm here that such notions are pure invention and fable. We already saw earlier that two commercial companies, and so not the church, were founded for the sole purpose of acquiring the land for the settlers and dividing it among the individual Colonists. And that division occurred in the manner of regular sales, so that every settler paid for his land out of his own means.

And so, the individual Colonist is master of his acreage, master of his farmstead, master of his house; and, regarding his state as master, no one can tell him otherwise. And if it should occur to someone to do so, no one would more emphatically refuse to tolerate it than the Mennonite pioneer. The right of decision over his property belongs completely and fully to him. He sows and harvests whatever and however he chooses. He sells his products when, to whom, and at what price he wants to, or stores them and speculates on better returns if that seems more advantageous to him.

He is obliged neither to the mayor nor the church for what he does or does not do in the management of his affairs in so far as he does not actually engage in activities that are detrimental to the

Colony as a whole. Naturally, there is a limit, and this is determined by the principle: "The common good before the individual good." That principle is well understood by the Mennonite of our Old Colony, and he governs himself accordingly. But in spite of this and other limitations that are placed on him as a member of his sect, he, nevertheless, occupies his own farmyard and land as a free farmer.

ABOUT "KNOCHENAERZTEN" [BONE DOCTORS] AND MEDICINES

The Colony has its own fire insurance, its own businessmen, craftsmen, dentists, and even doctors. The last-named modestly and appropriately call themselves "Knochenaerzte". They are pure practitioners who have learned what they know from their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers, who bequeathed them with a talent for dealing with ailments and wounds. Mostly we seem to be concerned here with people who may be compared to our medically skilled shepherds in Germany. But as far as, for example, the Mennonite doctor, Johann E. Enns, from the village of Rosenthal was concerned, whose consulting room and pharmacy used to be visited by Mennonites and Mexicans, here was a man who with his extensive practical ability and skill combined an astonishing amount of knowledge with an impressive personality. The same applies to our friend, Jakob A. Enns, the dentist.

The tellers of fairy tales, as one might well designate some who have reported on our Colony, would have us believe that the Mennonite makes no use of medicines at all; that he declines all medical aid and accepts illness as punishment willed by God, which he, as a sinful earthworm, does not believe he is permitted to forestall.

That may sound unusually authentic and interesting, but it simply is not true. By their way of life and the unique nature of their contemplative being, the Old Colonists seem actually to entice the observer from the outside to assume fantastic extremes and to come to categorical conclusions. This must be guarded against. The view one gets of the Old Colonists is not at all so extreme and categorical once the veil of prejudice has been penetrated.

Certainly, as a devout and deeply religious person, the Mennonite may sometimes see a punishment or a test by God in his illness. For him, simply all things have a connection with God, and so also sickness; but so also, correspondingly, the cure for it, for which the same God, in His endless mercy and grace, has provided a possibility as well. That in some instances these people first turn to their own "bone doctors' and other medical practitioners and exhaust all possibilities available among themselves before going only in extreme instances to the "worldly" doctor in the city, is just as understandable as is the fact that "worldly" medical agencies are vexed about this and assert indignantly that the Colonists would rather "turn up their toes than be cured."

Besides the pharmacy owned at one time by Johann E. Enns, which carried an extraordinarily versatile stock considering the rural conditions in which it was located, there are two other pharmacies in the Colony, as well as quite a number of other practitioners and midwives equipped to render medical assistance. Most of the village stores offer patent medicines for sale.

Today, Cuauhtemoc has a dozen pharmacies. H.G. Schmiedehaus opened the first of these in October of 1926, the Botica San Antonio. It is still in existence today.

Conscientious reporters are right, however, when they speak of ancient, handed-down medicines that are in use on the Old Colony farms. There we find
Russian Schlagwasser, Wunderoel, Kaiseroel, Alpenkraeuter, grandmother's Abfuehrtee and Dr. Bell's horse medicine, which is supposed to be beneficial for humans as well. But it is wrong to think that these are the only remedies the Old Colonists use, as many reporters would have us believe.

THE CHURCH

As can only be expected in a purely theocratic society, the churches are regularly attended. It is my firm purpose to avoid here any discussion of the Mennonite confession of faith as such. I feel that such a discussion would not belong in this book, in which the purpose is to describe and to relate. We know from the Introduction that this Protestant sect came into being during Luther's time and hence represents one of the oldest off-shoots of Protestantism; that as a result of a strongly conservative posture, observed in all spheres of life, the Old Colony Mennonites have maintained their original form to this day, almost without change. In addition to its minor differences with other evangelical faiths, the Old Colony people differentiate themselves from them in the following three points: they do not baptize the constituent until he is grown; they do not swear any oath; they refuse to serve in the military.

If the first two points are simply a matter of religious faith without other significance, the last one goes far beyond the realm of religion. It is of itself a basis for a philosophy, a view of life that had to become a subject of stubborn dispute from the moment that nations of the world began to initiate universal military service as a temporary or permanent law. I shall have more to say about
the Wehrlosigkeit [defenselessness] of the Mennonites in the next chapter.

And now, let us enter one of the houses of God in the Old Colony. It is bare of any external or internal adornment, a condition which may have a residual connection with the times of the iconoclasts. Houses of prayer were always among the first buildings to be erected wherever the Mennonites established themselves. So also, in Mexico. A large number of the churches which date from the beginning of the settlement are built of wood, as was the custom in Canada, from where also came a portion of the very first wood that was used in the settlement. Simple wooden benches, separated by an aisle in the middle, fill the space. Men and women are separated and sit on opposite sides of the aisle. Within reach above the men's benches is a horizontal molding with hooks on which hats and caps are hung.

The pulpit in front of the congregation is a simple reading lectern. Next to it, against the wall, is a separate bench for the lead singer or singers, whose important duty is to give the tune to the congregation and in drawn-out, abrading tones lead it from line to line and stanza to stanza. There are no musical instruments. Even an organ is proscribed. And so, the loud, unaccompanied, chantlike singing of the ancient church songs makes a uniquely strange impression on the uninitiated visitor. When one sees these people with their songbooks in front of their faces and hears the powerful sound surging from the wooden church out into the open, one is automatically reminded of Tacitus, the first historian to report on the harsh singing of Germanic people.

Frequent prayers are interposed between parts of the sermon, and at a signal from the preacher, the congregation turns around and in so doing throws itself on its knees, heads laid on the hard benches.

One is singularly affected by the frequent going out and coming back in of worshippers during the service. Women leave to take care of their children, men to look after their horses and meanwhile to stay out a bit longer to take a few extra puffs on their cigarettes before they again take their place on the hard bench. Finally, the worship service ends.

Many a visitor leaves the church oppressed. It has been difficult for him to sense here the bright ray of comfort, edification, and exaltation to which he is accustomed in the churches of the "world." And many a visitor has felt that Jehovah rules here, the stern God of the Old Testament, who avenges the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation; that here a religious heritage is laid upon young, growing shoulders that would appear to people from the outside to be almost too heavy and oppressive.

And yet…One would have to become one of the Old Colonists oneself, speak the Low German which they speak, cultivate the land, lead their simple, unpretentious life in order to understand that theirs is also a way to be happy; that this church, too, offers in its own way peace and salvation for the soul. At any rate, all these people now stream out of the church, wearing a look of satisfaction. They gather in groups in front of the house of God. Friends and relatives greet each other. Men smoke their cigarettes and wait patiently for their women to find the final word of leave-taking from each other. Finally, the light, horse-drawn vehicles roll away one by one, to separate from each other farther along the road where crossroads lead to the various surrounding villages.

OUTWARD POVERTY

"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." These words apply not only to the adults of the Colony, but also to the youth. For this reason, the games and gayety of the children are not to be overdone. Limits must be set early. The children soon become acquainted with the seriousness of life. From childhood on, they are to become accustomed to a life of hard work that pleases God. And so, they are drawn at an early age into the labor of cultivating the land. Even the little ones must help along on the farm, herding cattle, feeding the pigs, or taking care of smaller brothers and sisters, ranked beneath them like pipes of an organ.

What for other children is the greatest joy of childhood, the decorated tree sparkling in the glow of Christmastime, the little old Mennonites do not even become acquainted with. The Christmas tree is banned. That is a part of the avoidance of all outward show and glitter imposed on the Old Colonists. Besides, the Christmas tree goes back to pagan times and is therefore unacceptable to the uncompromising Mennonites.

But in this, too, we find that the boundaries are drawn thin and stretchable. Despite all the proscriptions, many of the little girls take care of homemade stuffed dolls, and boys who have received a wooden horse or a little wagon for Christmas find time enough to play with it and with various other nice things. The possibilities of what they can do with their talent for invention are quite without limits. So, for example, we admired an entire village in miniature, with houses and yards, gardens and windmills, tractors and implements all made by the children of my friend, Gerhard J. Rempel, out of

earth, wood, tin cans, and other commonly available materials that the children had appropriated for their use. Here many a spoiled boy from the city could learn something.

The Mennonite is not supposed to show off his earthly goods, but is, rather, expected to keep up an appearance and form of conduct more like that of the poor. Money and wealth, to be sure, are in no way prohibited and are just as sought-after by the Old Colonists as by other mortals; but they must not be exhibited or used for personal luxury. Matthew says in verse 24 of his nineteenth chapter that "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

I have known people among the Old Colonists who were worth half a million dollars but in spite of that gave an appearance of a most unassuming and unpretentious person. On the train, they travel in modesty with ordinary people; they disembark at inexpensive hotels and patronize the simplest restaurants. Any and all city pleasures are prohibited. Should one or another of them go to a cinema or attend a theatrical production or enter a bar, he would certainly not do so with the consent of the church, but rather on his own conscience and of his own responsibility.

Smoking is not prohibited; nevertheless, there seems somehow to be an unwritten law that only cheap cigarettes are to be considered, which, by the way, is in no way unfortunate in Mexico, blest as it is in so many ways: even the cheapest cigarettes here are good and made of the purest tobacco Cigars are considered in bad taste, being a much too expensive luxury. Apparently, cigarette smoking is a habit that dates back to Russia.

I have known only one Old Colonist who regularly bought cigars for himself, and in no way of a poor quality. That was our good friend, W.W. Wiebe, who liked to sit around and talk with his neighbors, none of whom were less talkative than he, and with whom, because of certain of his views, he was often in sharp disagreement. When in November of 1940, he welcomed us to his place and offered us a genuinely good cognac, I asked him about the cigars, whereupon he entered upon the following discourse:

"You see, all my life I have worked hard. Everything you see here, the land, the yard, the house, I have acquired with my own hands. And now that I have become old, they think that I should sit down in some corner and wait quietly until the Lord God calls me away. They believe I am living too high, possibly to the detriment of my children's inheritance, and maintain that I have, for God's sake, an obligation not to touch anything more down here. And that, they think, is what would be good and right. But let them stay off my back with that sort of righteousness! I am an old man and don't care in the least about what they are saying of me. I believe I have a right to favor myself in my old age with at least a few good things. And for that reason, I don't drink just any cheap Schnaps, but rather a good cognac. And as for the cigars, I simply prefer their taste to that of cigarettes, and it's all the same to me if they annoy my neighbors."

"And there is something else I would like to tell you. They'll all be standing on their heads when they find out. See that chest there? In it I have a money box with a couple of thousand pesos. With that money I'm going on a trip; yes, indeed, a long trip."

Old Wiebe paused, drew hard on his cigar and blew out a thick cloud of smoke before he went on.

"A trip to Germany. I will go as soon as the war is over. I want to have seen Germany once more before they carry me out to the cemetery, Germany, the land on the Vistula, where our forefathers were established at one time."

It was not to be for him. A few months later, Death stretched out his hand for old Wiebe. Now he doesn't annoy his neighbors anymore, and his children have taken over their inheritance, including those few thousand pesos which were intended for a trip to Germany.

Except for such minor concessions as smoking, everything "worldly" is forbidden in the Colony. For someone from the outside, it is often hard to comprehend what these people actually get out of life, since nothing that serves others as recreation, diversion, or as a pastime fills their leisure hours, no music, except that which is connected with the church, no dancing, which is avoided absolutely and completely, even in the form of folk dances such as are performed, for example, at harvest festivals. They wear no jewelry or finery; they do not go to the theater or the cinema; they engage in no games or athletic sports; they schedule no celebrations with banners and processions; they do not engage in target shooting, such as used to be the custom in farm villages of our German home. There are no bars in the Colony, no bowling alleys, and there is no card playing among the men, among whom, however, I know a substantial number who like very much to look for a pleasant change of pace in the noble sport of hunting.

And there are hunters among them who can afford to show themselves. Their time comes when late in the fall long flights of wild ducks appear over the laguna of Bustillos; when gray and white snow geese from up in Northern Canada arrive for their winter stay, and thousands of cranes populate the shores of the lake and the surrounding corn fields. It is the season when many a marksman gets up with the graying dawn or in the drizzle of a winter rain, hitches his horse to his vehicle, and drives out to the lake to stalk and bag the skittish wildlife by means of skillful techniques.

I have myself followed many a knowledgeable leader from among my friends in the Colony on such stalking trips, wading in the quagmire up to my belly or lying on a sandy stubble field or crouching behind a clump of tall cornstalks to waylay the gray goose or wild duck. And, God willing, it hasn't been for the last time that I have seen the sun rise over the valley of Bustillos – for the last time that I have left the village at dawn with my good friends in order to go hunting around the laguna out there.

And the women? For any kind of other than domestic activity, whether of social or sociable nature, they lack inclination; above all, they lack the time. Coffee parties, sewing circles, reading clubs are unknown. The Colony has as good as no books. Not that they are exactly forbidden en masse, but according to the view of many, they are for the most part unwelcome. Books contain too much of what doesn't belong in the Colony but that could sneak its way in. However, today, it seems to me, the thinking about books is generally more liberal; I will have more to say later on this subject.

MENNONITE PERIODICALS FROM CANADA AND THE USA

By rights, the intellectual nourishment of the Old Colonists is supposed to be limited to the Word of God. Besides the Bible, their customary reading material consists of Mennonite periodicals from Canada and the USA, which emphasize religion. Do these suffice to fulfill to the extent that one might

wish the aims of edification, education, and further development? When one considers that with but minor exceptions, there is hardly any other reading material in the Old Colony, the achievement of such aims does depend largely on these periodicals; and their publishers do concern themselves with this.

The actual news material in them is scanty. Articles and contributions other than such as are of a religious nature are rare. Religion is everywhere in the foreground, and the Word of God is associated with all and everything about which these publications know to report.

Like all newspapers, such periodicals are a mixture. Out of it the Old Colonist takes most of his other than Biblical mental nourishment. Together with sermons, explications of the gospel, mission reports, we find obituaries, accounts of illnesses, and death notices. There are letters from various countries in which Mennonites live, about life in the different settlements, about the weather in various places, about snow and storm, planting and harvesting. There are accounts of trouble and distress and again and again of the traditionally hard farm work in far-flung settlements as different from each other as possible.

The personal reports, often very detailed, frequently suffer from dialect, faulty composition and spelling. So also, the poetic offerings, as, for example, the following sad verse, written upon the death of a good aunt – how she, suspecting nothing amiss, went into her garden, where,

Ihr Bulle wuetend auf sie kam,	[She only meant her bull to tie,
Den sie nur wollt' anbinden,	Who in a rage upon her fell;
Und sie auf seine Hoerner nahm,	On long, sharp horns he tossed her high;
Es ist nicht auszugruenden.	A sadder tale none knows to tell.
Er riss ihr auf den Leib, so dass	He split her open, oh, the sight!
Ihr Eingeweide Schuettet aus.	Her entrails scattered left and right.]

Quite different where there is a dependence on trustworthy German intellectual sources, as in the case of the well-known words of farewell from a father to his son.

Halt hoch das Haupt, was dir auch droht	[Whate'er the threat, hold high your head
Und werde nie zum Knechte.	And never be a servant.
Brich mit den Armen gern dein Brot	With poor men gladly share your bread,
Und wahre seine Rechte	To guard their rights be fervent.
Treib nie mit heil'gen Dingen Spott	With holy things all jest eschew,
Und ehr' auch fremden Glauben	Honor even strange allegiance.
Und lass die deinen Herrn und Gott	But let no doubter take from you.
Von keinem Zweifler rauben!	Your God, your holy credence!
Und nun ein letzter Druck der Hand	And now a last touch of your hand,
Und eine letzte Bitte:	One solemn last petition:
Halt' dich getreu im fremden Land	Be loyal still in foreign land
Zu deines Volkes Sitte!	To your people's ways and vision!]

And to dwell on what is good we found, for example, a faultless essay from Schoenau in the Ferndale Colony in Paraguay about Joseph Ponten and his massive work Volk auf dem Wege [A People Enroute]. Ponten visited the Mennonites in Paraguay in 1936. Or we found a contribution that goes to the heart under the title "Die deutsche Muttersprache" [The German Mother Tongue] in which the author points out to the youth of today that German is neither a prohibited nor a foreign language in America. He admonishes his readers to continue to honor the heritage of the German mother tongue, as did their fathers.

WHY DOES THE FARMER NEED A CAR?

We are again rolling along on the level roads of the Colony in the high valley of Bustillos. It strikes us that by far most of the vehicles we meet are pulled by horses. Any car or truck that does rush by us certainly does not belong to the Colony. The automobile is among the things that are proscribed for the Old Colonist.

Why does the farmer need a car? Whether it takes him one or three hours to go to the city to do his shopping or to relatives he wants to visit in a more distant or neighboring village really plays no role in the tempo to which the Colony is adjusted.

Then, too, a car costs money, a large sum of money, far too much for the farmer, who has better things on which to spend his means. A car is and remains for him a luxury and a likely subject for argument, since one Colonist might drive around in a splendid, much too elegant limousine, while another might have to be satisfied with an ancient rattletrap in constant need of repairs, robbing him of time urgently needed for field work.

Such was the general mode of thought during the first two decades of the settlement.

In the meantime, because of necessity, much has changed in this regard. First, it was a question of rubber tires, which, after many stubborn arguments, were finally allowed to replace the cleated iron rims on their tractors. Then, finally, the truck and car also forced their way into the Colony, even if to this very day without the official approval of the Colony authorities.

One ought, however, not to laugh about the fact that although the Old Colonists are officially not allowed to have a car, they go about their farm work with the most modern machines, tractors, and gasoline engines. There is no contradiction in this. Machines are for work. They help with cultivation, with production and farm management and so further the actual purposes of the pioneer as he conquers the soil. The car, however, is an excess which only too often results in bitter experiences. At any rate, the Old Colonist is spared the fate which has befallen thousands of farmers in the USA. In their only possession, their Ford car in its last gasps, they move around the country with bag and baggage like nomads. The car they have, but no land.

Actually, the Old Colonists are not forbidden any and all use of a car, as is reported in mistaken accounts. For longer trips, they will hire one without any compunctions, and they also gladly go along in cars when people of the "world" ask them to do so. Only the elders for the most part decline – on principles; even in case of urgency, they prefer to hitch up and go their way with horse and carriage.

To come back to the many prohibitions and the expressed as well as unexpressed proscriptions, our Old Colonists, on the whole, lead a severely restricted life, as do also other religious sects, especially in America. When one considers that in that country there have been and still are sects which are so strict and fanatical that laughter is forbidden and church members always go about their way with sober faces and speak only in whispers, the lot of the Old Colonists seems more than bearable.

SOCIAL LIFE

In spite of all the inhibiting factors, the Old Colonists know well how to also extract the good things from life. Among themselves, they are sociable. Contrary to the typical silence of our Nordic farmers, they enjoy nothing so much as a fertile little gossip session. Long trips to the city made by two or more people together are opportunities for enjoyable conversation which shortens the trip. News spreads as fast as the wind throughout the Colony, even though distances to a hundred kilometers separate the villages and telephones and a telegraph system are not available.

Spontaneous visits among themselves are the rule and almost the only means by which leisure hours and holidays are filled. "Mau hankummen!" [Come over sometime!] is often the last word as goodbyes are said in front of the church or in stores when they meet in the city. It is an invitation to come soon for a visit. The technical term for such social intercourse is the verb "spazere," meant in the transitive sense. When the Mennonite goes "spazere" with someone, he does not mean in the sense of the German verb spazieren, that he goes for a stroll or a ride with someone, but rather that he goes to visit someone at his house. And then while they crack roasted sunflower seeds between their teeth and the hulls soon cover the brightly polished floor, they talk and talk, "wird gekloent," as we would say; or they may bargain with each other, "wird geschachert," as the Old Colonist prefers to express himself. They also smoke a few cigarettes and take a small glass of Schnaps.

In preparing the drink, the host fetches a cup, pours some sugarcane alcohol into it and mixes it with water, a thrifty libation with which the visitors and host refresh themselves. Here, too, as in everything else, thrift and frugality emphasize poverty, even though it is nonexistent.

"IT IS NOT GOOD THAT MAN SHOULD BE ALONE."

Engagement celebrations, weddings, and deaths offer larger opportunities for social occasions. Invitations to such events go out by word of mouth or are sent through the villages in the form of written announcements. Following is an authentic invitation such as is formally customary in the event of an engagement celebration.

Esteemed friends:

> Because the wise counsel of God has ordained that our daughter, Helena, and the bachelor, Jakob Reimer, have promised themselves to each other in marriage, and since it is their intention, God willing, to enter upon a Christian engagement on the next coming Saturday, the 11th day of the month, we are pleased to invite all friends named herein on the back of this page, together with their dear families, to come to our home at 12 noon on the above named date to

carry out with us the engagement celebration in a Christian manner and to partake afterwards of a modest but well-intentioned meal, which it will be at any time our pleasure to serve.

Your affectionate friends,
David and Agatha Dyck, Kleefeld

Such gatherings are, at least in their first part, rather formal, being the equivalent of a religious observance, as is indicated by the expression "celebration in a Christian manner." Young and old come together on the date named at the farm of the bride's parents, from whom, also, came the invitation. Usually, guests arrive well on time in order to do justice right away to an excellent meal, which is taken partly in the house and partly outside if there are many guests. On benches lined up along a wall of the house is a long row of plates with meats and bowls of soup. Everyone helps himself from these if the girls who are serving cannot keep up.

The betrothal celebration takes place inside. The assembly sings curious old songs. There is a song of greeting to the bridal pair and an answering song, both with long, tedious verses, like those of the songs sung in church. Guests express their good wishes. When the bride steps out of the house, she wears neither the bright shawl that she wore as a girl, nor yet the black cap with the hood [Haube], under which she is about to come (according to the old German saying). From this point on the celebration becomes more relaxed. Soon coffee and "Zwieback" are served from long tables in the shed. The "Zwieback" [twice-baked] is misnamed, for in actuality it is an "Einback" [once-baked].

Very soon now the older and younger guests separate. The former stand or sit in discreet groups and talk about the weather, the harvest; about the pigs, which are suffering from a strange disease this year and have already died in large numbers; about experiments with the new wheat seed; about business affairs and transactions. And despite their "Wehrlosigkeit" and their refusal to participate in politics and national citizenship – they are, after all, citizens of the kingdom of God – they also speak of the war, which, until now, has not brought any blessing to the world but has caused, rather, conditions out of which there hardly seems a way out. They also speak about peace, for which there has been so great a hope, and about what will happen next, and about England, Germany, Canada, and, not lastly, about Russia and Communism.

The young ones know of a few things to tell each other that the preachers are not supposed to hear. But in the end, whatever the Old Colony's youth knows to tell about, it is harmless, simple, and plain. They are not at all so abtruennig [recreant], so affected by the "world" as many of the oldsters fear, disregarding, of course, exceptions. Even though the boys may secretly keep a transistor nowadays, even though they may now and then pull a harmonica out of their pocket and play behind the door of a shed a modern tune which they have heard in town or during a likewise secret visit to the cinema, and which has nothing in common with the old church songs, they will, nevertheless, very soon enter into an early marriage and transform themselves into the same respectable, uncompromising Old Colonists that their fathers are. They will continue to live and work as faithful members of the congregation, without changing so much as one iota of its tradition, not even in matters where small changes could do no harm, as, for example, in their educational system, of which we spoke earlier.

On the day of a betrothal celebration, the whole village quits working early. As soon as the afternoon begins to wane into evening, the young people, dressed if their Sunday best, begin to move back and forth on the broad village street, arm in arm and in groups, which become smaller the darker the evening becomes.

Sometimes no more than two weeks pass between engagement and marriage.

The dead are buried simply, with but little ceremony. Outside, somewhere in the fields, are the cemeteries, without crosses or tombstones or mounds; without trees or attended grounds, which would be almost impossible to keep considering the climate and lack of water. With a short prayer and benediction, the simple coffin is lowered into the grave. Then the procession of mourners proceeds to the house of the bereaved in order to partake of the funeral feast that dates back to the Middle Ages.

In this too, as in all things, we meet with tradition. This one has been observed for many hundreds of years, and so it is also observed today; that is how it is, and that is how it will be. With it comes the likewise traditional and soberly practical explanation: if the guests have come a long distance, from a place an hour or even half a day away, to show the deceased their last respect, they have become hungry in the meanwhile and must be fed. Life demands its right. "The show must go on."

"It is not good that man should be alone." For this reason, the average Old Colonist marries young. The engagement period, as we have seen, is short; marriage following engagement after only a few weeks. In the affairs of love, the young members of the Colony do not differentiate themselves in any way from the rest of mankind. At festive gatherings or in church or across the neighbor's fence, or wherever opportunity makes it possible, they learn to know and love each other, become engaged, enter into the holy bond of marriage, found a household, and rear a God-fearing family.

Large families are the rule. In Genesis, we read, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." When Baroness Ruedt von Collenberg, wife of the German ambassador, paid the Colony a visit with her husband, she asked a family rich housefather how many children he had. He thoughtfully scratched his head for a moment before he answered,

"Fourteen."

After a bit he added carefully,

"By now."

Amidst the general connubial joys of the Old Colony, bachelorhood is a rare exception. And certainly no one is in greater need of a comrade for life than is the farmer. House and yard demand a mistress – the housewife. Who else is to take care of the household, the laundry, the sewing, the housekeeping, the garden, the young cattle? Who else will milk the cows, make cheese and butter, bake the daily bread, and, not lastly, take care of the master of the house? All these are the duties of the very busy housewife, duties which she must perform in addition to bearing and rearing children. If it weren't more or less the same with other farm folk, one would be tempted to say that an almost too hard lot is apportioned to the women of this small ethnic group.

Divorce is obviously out of the question. In Matthew 19:6, we read, "What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

Nothing can stir or shake this principle; on the question of divorce, the Old Colonists are just as inflexible as the Catholic Church.

To remarry after bereavement is proper and very much the custom. There is no official year of mourning to interfere with a quick remarriage and with it the normalization of the household in question. Anyone who has lost a spouse is free to observe a period of mourning for as long or as short a time as his or her feelings and free inclination require; in this respect the church holds to no rules or obligations.

Our round trip through the Colony has come to an end. As we return, we again drive past Klaas Heide's former property in Blumenort, which still stands there exactly as he built it at that time. Only the trees have grown taller during the years that have since passed. In the orchard, the ripe fruit hangs from the branches; the sunflowers are aglow; grapes hang from the vines. Do our eyes betray us, or is that actually Klaas Heide's slender frame, straight as an arrow there at the gate, as at that time when we were still young? When, filled with enthusiasm, we helped along with the work of these pioneers and looked upon this man, who in his simple, plain greatness seemed to embody the whole work of colonization – all that which makes the German colonist the trail blazer of a culture. Do our eyes betray us? We wave him a stray greeting.

Dust swirls behind our car. We are leaving his place behind. The yards of Blumenort fall back on both sides, and the Colony is behind us. We are back on the road to Cuauhtemoc.

In a few minutes we are again in the middle of everyday life, in gray reality, back in Mexico, having just come from a distant, uniquely foreign, and yet intimately familiar land that touches us with a feeling of home.

Der Kinderreichtum der Altkolonier ist sprichwörtlich. Familien mit von 14 bis 18 Kindern sind keine Seltenheit, wie die Familie Rempel aus Blumenort, Campo 22 beweist.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Der mennonitische ,,Bus" hat keine Motorpannen und braucht weder Öl noch Benzin.

Foto: Heinrich Ens

Es hat lange gedauert, bis die Kolonie-Autoritäten Gummireifen an den Traktoren gestatteten. Seitdem ist diese Art des Person- und Warentransports gang und gäbe.

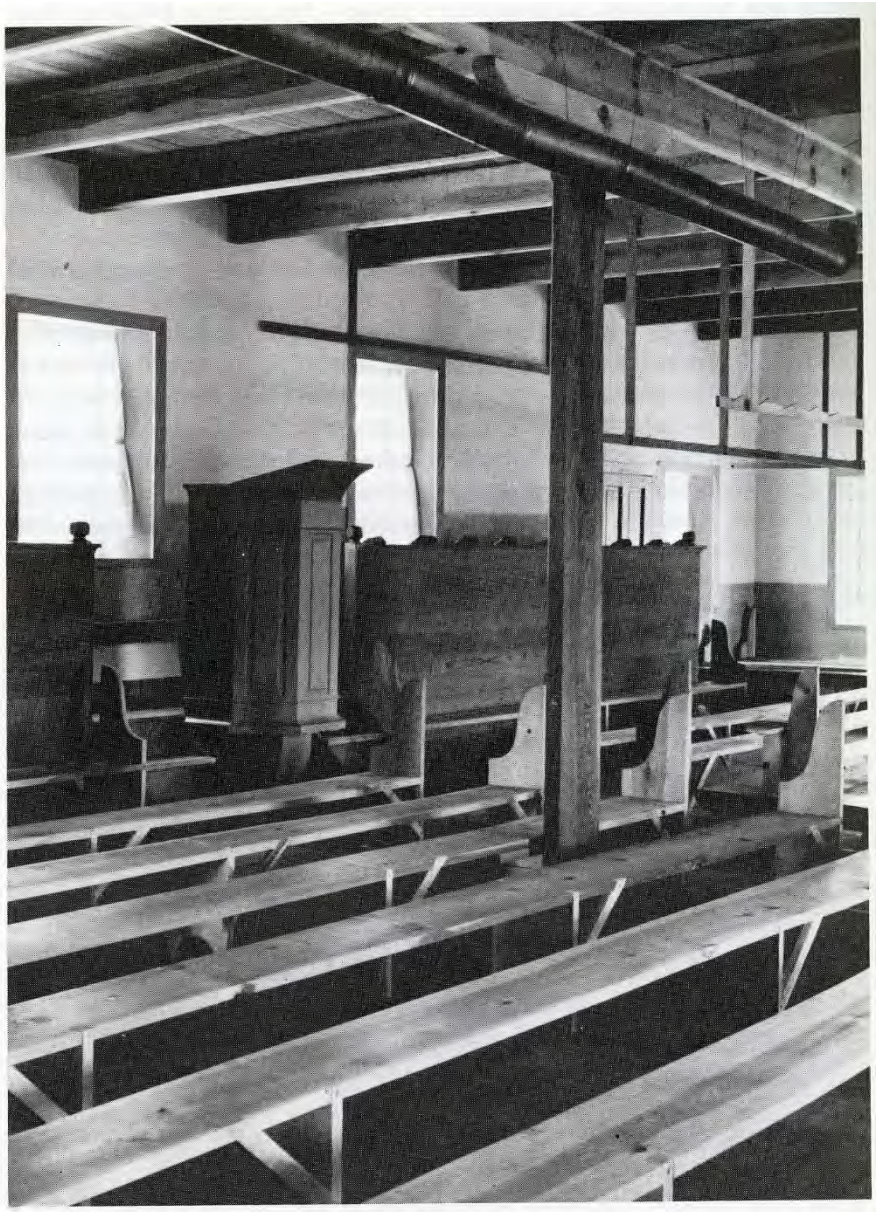
Foto: D. Brinzer

Wie spielen die Kinder Altkolonie? Aus Erde, Holz, Blechbüchsen und sonstigen häuslichen Materialien bauen sich die Kinder der Familie Rempel ein richtiges kleines Mennonitendorf.

Foto: Dr. Ponzelet

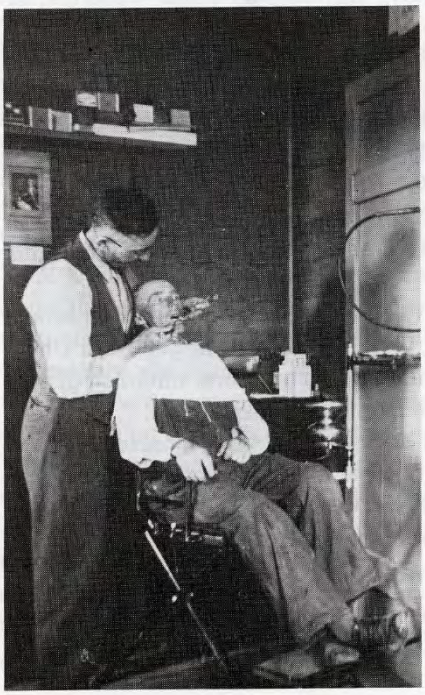
Kleine Mädchen der Altkolonie spielen mit heimgefertigten Stoffpuppen.
Foto: F.W. Butterlin

Vor der Kirche — Fuhrwerke, Räder und Schatten.
Foto: F. W. Butterlin



Das schmucklose, nur ernsten und besinnlichen Gedanken reservierte Innere der Altkolonie-Kirche in Gnadenfeld, Campo 2B.

Foto: Ken Hiebert



Der Zahnarzt Jacob A. Enns behandelt seine Patienten. (Damals Rosenthal, Campo 6)

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Den Dr. Johann E. Enns, in seiner ländlichen Apotheke in Rosenthal, Campo 6, konsultierten nicht nur die Kolonisten, sondern auch viele mexikanische Patienten.

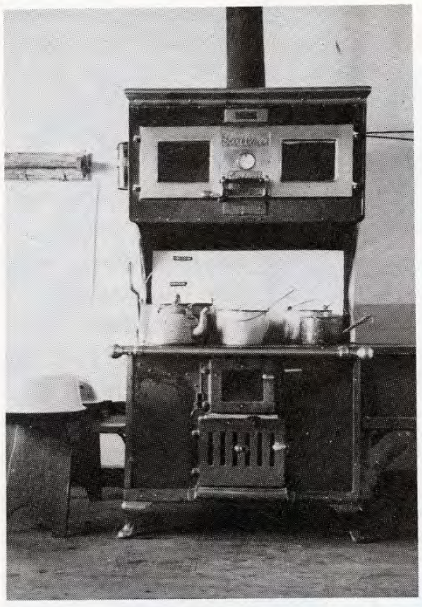
Foto: Ken Hiebert

Frauen der Altkolonie — ernst die Gesichter, schwarz Kopftuch und Kleider — rüsten sich zum Kirchgang in Kronsgart, Campo 27.

Foto: Ken Hiebert

Die Töchter unseres Freundes J.J. Thiessen aus Hamburg, Campo 3, in ihrem Wohnzimmer.

Foto: F. W. Butterlin

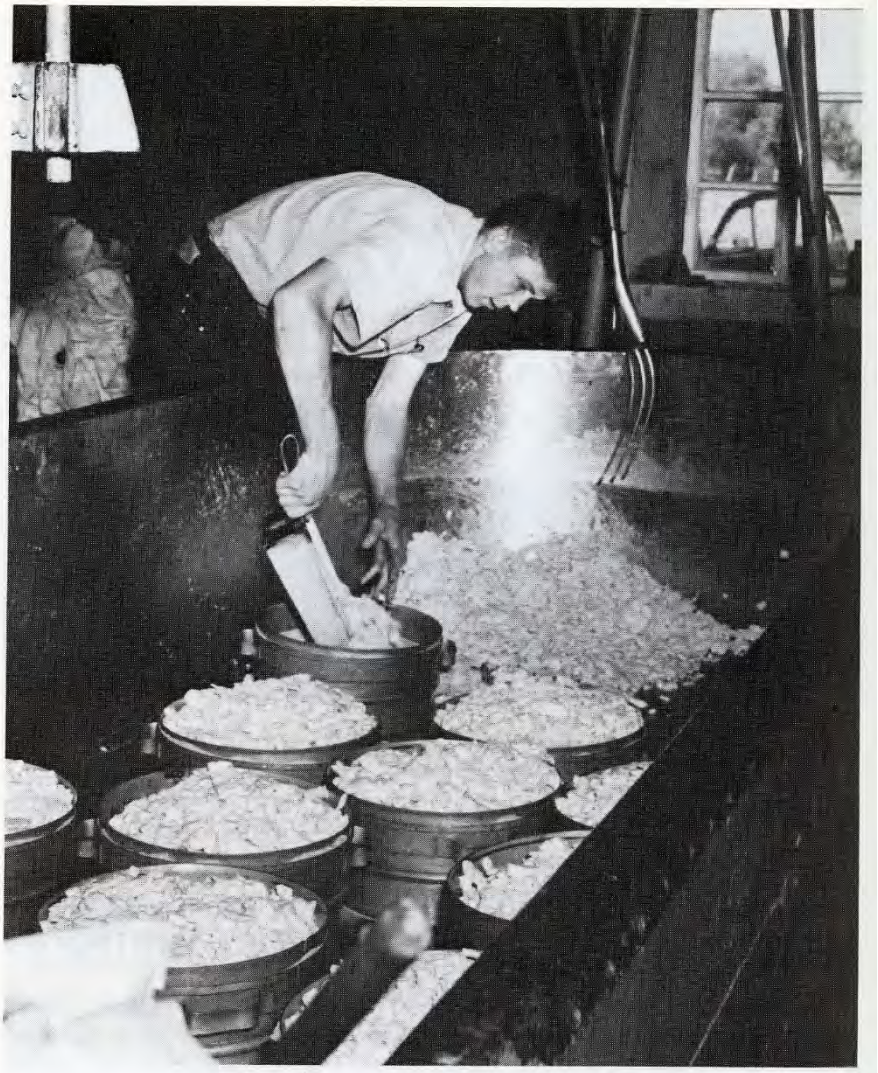


Ein guter Herd ist nicht nur der Mittelpunkt des häuslichen Wirtschaftslebens, sondern gleichzeitig ein Schmuckstück der Küche.

Foto: Dr. K. J. Pelzer

Trauliche Ecke im Wohnzimmer der Familie Rempel in Blumenort, Campo 22. Von der Decke hängt der mexikanische Weihnachtskaktus.

Foto: Ken Hiebert



Die Käserei von Jacob Enns in Blumenort, Campo 22. Seit Jahrzehnten erfreut sich der in der Kolonie hergestellte Käse großer Beliebtheit in ganz Mexiko.

Foto: Ken Hiebert

Peter J. Rempel aus Osterwick, Campo 18 fährt mit der Hungerharke übers herbstliche Stoppelfeld, auf daß kein Halm verloren gehe.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

In der Mitte die breite Straße, zu beiden Seiten die einzelnen Anwesen — die typische Dorfstraße in der Altkolonie.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Hochbeinige amerikanische Windmotoren, genannt ,,Kreisel", versorgen Häuser und Ställe mit frischem Wasser. *Foto: Die Mennonitische Post*

Aus dem vom Vater hergestellten Kinderwagen kräht das Nesthäkchen der Familie.

Foto: F. W. Butterlin

Bub und Hund sind unzertrennliche Spielgefährten.

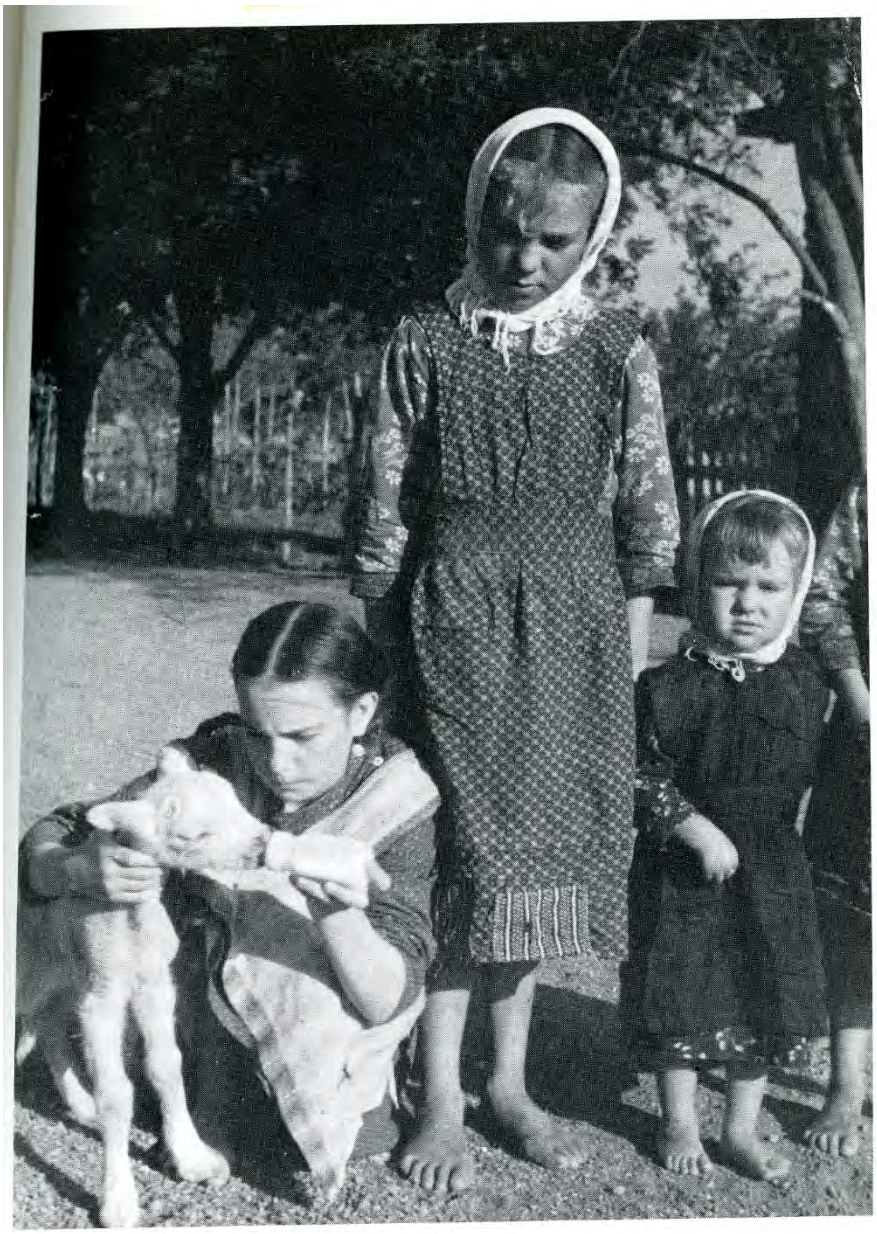
Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Als man die ersten provisorischen Behausungen in der Neusiedlung von ,,Ojo de la Yegua" errichtete, wurden auch die ersten Ackerfurchen aufgebrochen.

Foto: A. Redekop

Zu Anfang der Ansiedlung in Mexiko und noch viele Jahre später durfte nur mit Traktoren mit eisernen Rädern gearbeitet werden.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus



Mit viel Geduld und Liebe kümmern sich die Kinder um das Jungvieh.
Foto: D. Brinzer

Schon früh lernt die Jugend mit landwirtschaftlicher Gerätschaft umzugehen.

Foto: F. W. Butterlin

Die erste Kirche aus Holz zu Neuenburg, Campo 21, die wenige Monate nach dem Eintreffen der ersten Einwanderer erbaut wurde.

Foto: Dr. G. Wiens

12. A People of Many Riddles

Occasional visitors for whom the Colony is only something interesting to see, and who, therefore, look only at what is external, often express their admiration for what they have seen in superlative terms. Others, depending on their particular way of looking at things, or their particular reasons for coming to the Colony, also express themselves in superlatives, but from a negative point of view. To them the colony people are backward, peculiar, even impossible and hopeless.

Both points of view are wrong. But while the former group with its extravagant admiration does no one any harm, I must defend my Old Colony friends against those of the latter group, who speak disdainfully of them, put them down, bring them into ill repute. One ought not to break the rod across the back of a German ethnic group too quickly, discounting it as hopeless, so long as it demonstrates something which is fundamentally considered – and rightly so—to be worthy of high esteem –namely, accomplishment.

A UNIQUE ACCOMPLISHMENT

That is what critics who radically condemn our Old Mennonites, writing them off as hopeless, carelessly overlook or forget: their accomplishment. This accomplishment, in spite of everything that is said against these people, is there, so unique, so visible that anyone who is willing to look cannot pass over it. And the most fundamental sense of justice constrains us to give it recognition without circumscription.

This great accomplishment is, of course, not fully obvious to those who while visiting the colony in its present, developed state take much of what they see from the outside, perhaps even everything for granted without considering in any detail the tremendous expenditures of strength and will, of energy and sacrifice of great personal effort on the part of every individual that were needed to produce what is there today, to fashion it out of nothing out of the wilderness, the desert, the bitter unknown that had to be conquered first, step by step in a peaceful but also difficult unrelenting struggle with its thousands of obstacles and difficulties known only to the pioneering Colonists, but which now remain all too easily concealed from the incidental, yes, even the seasoned visitor.

And when in various places, be it in Germany, the USA or anywhere else, people who are concerned about the significance of Mennonitism in the world are informed about the Old Colony in Mexico by those in whom they have confidence, there is often too little recognition, in view of the many things to be reported, of the exceedingly great, and for Mexico unique, achievement, accomplished there by our “backward”, “odd”, and even “hopeless” Old Mennonites.

Not that this accomplishment is something new, displayed only by our contemporary Old Colonists. It is, rather, much more typical and indicative of the entire long migratory route they have followed across the years. Wherever they have sojourned, in Russia, in Canada, in Mexico, their accomplishment has stood at the beginning and end of everything, always being an integral part of the

history of their development, in which their German blood and German seat has been such an important component.

Wherever the Mennonites have settled, they have been a credit to themselves and their origins as they are again today in Mexico, where one can only look with unhesitating pride on the gigantic pioneering work accomplished by these fellow countrymen.

DIE WEHRLOSIGKEIT [DEFENSELESSNESS]

Just what is it that the Mennonites in Mexico are accused of, that causes so much offense? It is quite a number of things.

One of these things –particularly where Mennonites are not known – is their religious principle of defenselessness. This principle is incomprehensible to such as consider military service as a duty and honor. It is in direct opposition to what the average citizen of any country considers to be right and necessary.

The Reverend F.G. Fraustadt, who was entrusted with the leadership of the German Protestant Church in Mexico, expressed in a report understandable distaste for the Mennonites' failure to comprehend that besides taking from one's country the means of life and being, one must also give oneself to its defense. He writes further,

> When I looked at these hardy youths and these men of German stock and considered that they would allow any stranger to strike them in the face, to rob and murder them without lifting a hand in natural self-defense, yes, without being permitted to lift it, I couldn't get it into my German head and mind.

Certainly, the categorical principle which demands defenselessness in all circumstances is at first disconcerting. Reverend Fraustadt characterizes with a few words what is of foremost importance here when he says that a people must also defend the land which it occupies and cultivates; and if necessary, it must do so with weapons and with life itself. There is little or nothing to be argued against this, and outside of Mennonite circles, very few will be found who disagree with Reverend Fraustadt. It is a fundamental principle to which all nations subscribe.

The Old Colony people, however, do not subscribe to it. Quite apart from the Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," it is also written that "…they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." And when, according to John's Gospel, Peter drew his sword as the Lord was being taken prisoner, and cut off the ear of a servant of the high priest, Jesus commanded him, "Put up thy sword into the sheath; the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?"

According to the Old Colony's confession of faith, Jesus meant only one thing; the use of the sword is prohibited, and with it the rifle, as well as all service in the military and particularly in people-murdering modern warfare. With a firmness of faith that is without compare, the Old Colonist refuses without compromise to perform any kind of military duty; it is an irrevocable refusal, one for which Mennonites have always even prepared to make unconditionally every imaginable sacrifice. Armed military and war service is the result of man-made, perhaps even, unavoidable laws, but to the Old

Colonist, it offends explicitly against the expressly declared will of God, and to the Old Colonist, the Word of God stands supreme above all the laws of man.

One often hears that a people which grows up in the spirit of defenselessness must eventually become conditioned to cowardice and fear. Such objections, too, show on the part of those who raise them how little they understand Mennonite psychology, especially Old Colony psychology. I believe that courage and bravery can also be a part of the avowal of defenselessness. In the USA and in Canada, special provisions are made for so-called "conscientious objectors," that is young men of military age who decline for religious reasons to perform military service with a weapon. During World War I, such was not generally the case. At that time – I'm speaking here of the USA, for in Canada, documented special privileges exempted the Mennonites from military service – Mennonites were frequently drawn into military service.

In January of 1924, Mennonites in California whose word I have no reason to doubt told me that people of their faith were drafted and put into uniform but refused – those who have served as soldiers will find this hard to imagine – to swear an oath to defend their country and to accept a weapon. Obviously, they were severely disciplined. But punishment was of no use. So other means were tried. Fellow soldiers were ordered to mock the Mennonites and treat them with contempt. Aspersions were cast on their honor as men and citizens. Finally, it is reported, they were sometimes flogged in front of assembled troops, but that, too, accomplished nothing.

Then – so I was told – they were thrown into prison, and everything possible was perpetrated on them. The refusal to swear the oath and to take a weapon was interpreted to constitute almost any military crime, including high treason, calling for the death sentence. If the Mennonite still remained firm, he was taken out one morning, ostensibly to be summarily executed. And if he still remained firm, calmly looking down the shiny gun barrel while awaiting the bullet, the military authorities would finally give up and shake their heads, withdraw the firing squad and dismiss the Mennonite as a hopeless case.

To try to explain something like this with nothing more than the word <u>fanaticism</u> would be to avoid the truth. The Mennonite is not now and never was fanatical. It takes something else, something more profound, to withstand such difficult, ultimate tests, and that <u>something</u> besides calling it the <u>firmness of conviction</u> we would like to label with the simple word <u>courage</u>. It is reported that after one such ultimate test involving a mock firing squad, an American officer shook the hand of the Mennonite involved and said, "Friend, I respect your courage."

I might add that I have found people everywhere who, as soon as they had actually penetrated this subject to its core, showed a complete understanding of it. In April of 1939, for example, I received a letter from a German in Mexico City whom I didn't know but who had read some of my writings about the Mennonites, who wrote in part:

> I am referring to the principle of "defenselessness." Let's be honest. Are the Old Colonists better or poorer Christians [for it]? Is it they or we who are following the commands of Christianity? I take my hat off to the Mennonites, for the very reason that they are the ones who show character, who are true Christians in a sea of opposition.

What is right must remain right, and so my hat is off to these "Kerlen" [real men], almost the only ones who deserve to be called that.

A special and very subjective issue is that of self-defense. To go by the letter of the law, it, too, is prohibited for the Mennonite. In Luke 6:29, we read: "And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also."

Eventually, however, everything has its limits. We certainly cannot assume that the Old Colonist lacks the natural instinct of self-preservation that is common to man and beast, or that this instinct can be completely destroyed by the belief of a religious sect. Theoretically, Reverend Fraustadt, who demonstrated an otherwise warm interest in the Mennonites, was right in what he wrote. But during the long years in which I have known the Colonists, I have not been aware of a single case in which one of them would have allowed himself to be struck in the face without offering resistance. On the contrary, I know of numerous instances which illustrated that despite all of his defenselessness, the Old Colonist is, in case of emergency, very much the sort of man who takes the protection of his person and his possessions into his own hands.

In Durango, a plucky Mennonite woman reached for a shotgun and properly peppered the hide of a pair of robbers who had hoped to make an "easy job" of her place. They were convinced in a rather painful manner that the "safe working over "of the Colony had its dark side. To be sure, the woman later had to appear before the elder to repent and ask forgiveness, for she had, after all, "taken a weapon," and from the point of view of the church, hers was indeed a serious case. But her deed remained and apparently had beneficial results for the Colony, the burglars having heeded the instruction of their lesson.

In one of the small village stores near Cuauhtemoc, a suspicious looking pair hung around until in a favorable moment they were able to pull a gun on the owner and demand the cash box. For reasons of security, the storekeeper kept a rifle behind a partition. It was prohibited, of course, but very useful in cases such as the present one. He quickly ducked under his counter, scrambled behind his partition. His rifle was unloaded, but when he drew back its hammer, the click was unmistakable to the robbers, who quickly disappeared, leaving no trace behind.

One young farmer was put hard to the test when strange cattle kept grazing off his newly sprouted crop. It finally came to violent arguments and actual threats. The young farmer, his patience exhausted, struck out at random with a hitching chain, knocking his antagonists unconscious. The affair had unpleasant results in so far as the farmer was prosecuted under the law and in addition had to answer to the church, for there must be order. But he had accomplished his purpose and henceforth was left in peace.

I mention these examples, to which many more could be added, only in order to give those people something to think about who insist that the Old Colonists are fearful and pitiful because they do not want to have anything to do with weapons and military service or any other application of force.

In connection with this, I would like to point to a particular law of Nature, of which today's mankind with all its jealousy and mistrust, its ideological as well as warlike disagreements reminds itself all too rarely. It is summarized in the German proverb," Whatever you shout into the forest will echo from it."

In actuality, the entire existence of the Old Colonists, their uncomplicated, upright expression of life, demonstrates the truth of this saying. They live and preach harmony, kindness, patience and trust. They call, "Peace!" into the forest, so to speak, and ninety times out of a hundred, it is peace that echoes back at them.

So it was at the time when they peacefully struggled through the conflict with the agrarians, in which other people, less intent on peace, would have lost their patience. So it was again and again in all kinds of large and small conflicts, and so it always is in everything that these people undertake. They charge the very atmosphere around themselves with trust and peacefulness, and their surroundings react in the same way.

And so the instances of sharp dispute which might call for self-defense have truly been rare. And hence the very questions concerning defenselessness that seem so important to others are among the very least of the worries on the Old Colonists' mind.

THE BLENDING OF GERMANIC ETHNICITY WITH A LITERAL SENSE OF THE BIBLE

As for the Old Colonists' dependence on the Bible for all the things of life, the Old Testament is notably in the foreground. The most common names of their males, for example, are those of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jakob, followed by Aaron, Daniel and David. After this come names that are Biblical, but taken from the New Testament, such as Johann, Peter , Zacharias, and others. After that come names that are no long Biblical, but are still foreign, such as Klaas (Nikolaus,) Julius, and Cornelius. Finally, we find such purely Germanic names as Dietrich, Gerhard, Heinrich, Hermann, Isbrand, and Wilhelm.

Curiously, the Old Testament does not play the same major role in the choice of female names. Sarah and Judith are really the only ones that occur often; now and then, we find Eva. Female names from the New Testament or other, foreign sources are Agatha, Aganeta, Kathrina, Elisabeth, Helena, Margarethe, Maria, Neta, Susanna. Pure German names for women are lacking almost entirely, and one has to search for a long time for a rare Emma, Selma, or Frieda. And with that, we have all but exhausted the first names found in Old Colony registers; as we have noted, they show a strong Biblical influence.

In other areas as well, we find this influence. The Old Colonists are fond of comparing themselves – and their history strengthens this – with the "Children of Israel," whom the Lord led from place to place. The question is often asked as to whether the Old Colonists, too, consider themselves the "Chosen People." One may assume that their general modesty prohibits their putting forward such a lofty claim. Nevertheless, one often hears Old Colonists referring to themselves as the "Church of God", but they hardly intend to say with this that they are the "chosen people" of God.

They follow numerous Old Testament customs. Even their speech sometimes shows a Biblical form of expression. For example, they like to use the word "schachern" when speaking about dealing or trading. Trading and bargaining are probably considered matters of necessity.

A LACK OF BUSINESS ETHICS?

The writer, Franz Ketelhut, who struggled so earnestly to find the key to the essence of these unique countrymen, saw in their business dealings one of those puzzles of their character which seem so hard to solve. He had heard numerous complaints about unethical businessmen among the Old Colonists, who were said to be, by no means easy-going in money matters and who, in certain circumstances and without further consideration, saw nothing amiss in taking advantage of others.

And that was said of an otherwise proverbially faithful German honesty of which so much was made? How, Hans Ketelhut asked with honest concern, did such things fit together? Was this too, something connected with the Old Testament? For didn't Jakob betray his brother Esau for the birthright, and did not Jakob receive and retain the blessing in spite of this? Apparently, the melding of primitive German ethnic characteristics with the often so hard to understand rigidity of the Bible taken word for word sometimes brought remarkable results.

The widely spread reports about unethical business dealings among the Colonists could for the most part have to do with exceptions. Certainly, dishonest business deals do not fit into the total picture with which the reader who has patiently followed this book to this point has become acquainted. True, it is not always easy to come to terms with the farmer's philosophy on business dealings. It requires patience, as do all things that are to be understood. No doubt many have experienced disappointments in this respect. I have experienced them myself. In the main, however, such disappointments are probably traceable to misunderstandings, ignorance, or other unintended factors.

One should especially guard against taking at face value the reproachful complaints of certain "confidence people." Usually there is something questionable behind their stories. Perhaps some Colonist with a healthy amount of farmer's cunning did not let himself be fleeced as easily as had been hoped. Or perhaps someone had made a bad deal because he had miscalculated to his own loss, for which he now would like to find someone to blame. Or there may be personal antipathy at play.

Whatever the case may be, on this subject, as with most subjects, people talk first and loudest about what is bad and tend to keep silent about what is good; and so stories about crooked deals and unethical business practices which someone has experienced some time or another with the Colonists quickly come to the fore. But anyone who intends to present such stories as established custom and unfailing rule either lacks good will or is missing a sense of justice.

The German Mennonite, wherever he is in the world, is an honest person. Where he is not considered to be such, his supposed dishonesty needs to be proved in his individual case. Black sheep are found everywhere. So, let someone throw the first stone.

THE "ATTITUDE" OF THE OLD COLONIST

And now a further grave reproach against the Mennonites of the Old Colony, voiced from all sides. It concerns their attitude. The word is of itself too inclusive. What is meant specifically is their attitude toward what is political, national, and patriotic, or, better, the scarcity or even complete lack of an attitude toward these things.

But to criticize them on this count does not tell us what the patriotic disposition of a group of people ought to be toward a homeland when for two hundred years that people has not had a homeland in any real sense of the word; or what one should imagine a people should feel politically who have been permitted since the time of Luther to live in isolation on an intellectual island without being influenced by politics and without having an understanding of its connections. No, criticism does not tell us what can be expected of the Old Colonists given the peculiar conditions under which they have lived.

In brief, their national attitude, which cannot really be called national and much less political, has always been the one which is found in the Bible in the words, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." In other words, they have always been faithful and obedient subjects, conscientiously performing their duties as citizens within the framework of the concessions that had been granted them, always doing their share as best they could in opening up and developing their host country economically. In time of need or under exceptional conditions, they have always done their share for the well-being of their country by means of greater "sacrifices" or other peaceful contributions.

Such have been the outward, the obligatory features, so to speak of the Old Colonists' thoroughly respectable general attitude, observed and recognized in the fullest sense wherever they settled.

As for the inner symbols of their attitude, these have always been such as were welcomed at first by their host country, but which in the long run that country found insufficient. These symbols, to summarize them in a single concept, consist of their Germanism.

It is not that these people have merely maintained their German heritage, their German language, their German school, their German Bible as things well worth preserving in a way that numerous German ethnic groups have done in America. No, they have carried as relics those things that are their Germanism before them like a Host, always as their purpose, always as their goal, always inexorably joined to their being, always as the basic condition of their existence as a people.

We will find that the Old Colonists have consistently given their particular, or, if we prefer, their peculiar attitude a positive meaning in the things of their life. In so doing they have for a period of two hundred years in foreign lands preserved in unadulterated form everything that was most sacred to them: their ethnicity, their language, everything that represents the way of their fathers, down to the minutest detail, including the respectable sturdy pieces of rural furniture, with which we became acquainted in the previous chapter, their ancestral household wares, the home baked daily bread, great-grandmother's household remedies, and the handed-down unattractive but chaste garb for women, and the black suit worn by the men on Sundays and holidays.

ATTITUDE TOWARD THE LANGUAGE OF THE LAND

At home, the Old Colonists have never spoken anything but their native Low German; in school and in church they use High German. Even when they live in a land for decades, they continue to view its language as a secondary one, learning it partly because doing so happens of itself and partly because it is necessary for their association with the surroundings. But they have never accepted the language of the land as a means of communication among themselves, as, for example, the European settlers in the

USA have almost always done. For the Old Colonists know that the language of the land is the first door to what is foreign in the world. Once the threshold of this door has been crossed, it will be impossible to prevent cracks in the building of their closed ethnicity, and in time the existence of the colony as a whole, its closed unity in the pioneering of faith and farming, will be in jeopardy.

It is the tragedy of the migrating Colonists that this attitude, held to be so worthy of their own respect, must sooner or later always come in conflict with the legitimate interests of their host country.

LIMITATIONS OF THE FIELD OF VISION

So much for some of the main characteristics of the Old Colonists that may in a general way be referred to as their "attitude." A step further, and we come upon the Old Colonists' concept and view of life, their philosophy, which may be said, without going into great detail, to exhibit unmistakably in all areas of intellectual activity a narrow-mindedness that is stipulated by obligation. This characteristic explains much of what appears under superficial observation to be so puzzling and contradictory.

We have already seen that it is the full intention of the colony to ban all things modern, including basic essentials, that might in some way jeopardize the status quo and hence bring undesirable results. Telephone and telegraph service, which have been repeatedly offered to the Colonists in order to bring them closer to the city and to provide for quick communication with business establishments, with doctors, the police, and government headquarters in case of emergency, have been consistently refused. Listening to the radio is absolutely forbidden. "Worldly" periodicals are not exactly proscribed, but neither are they considered particularly desirable. With but few exceptions, materials published in a language other than German are not read. But then, at best only a few of the older Colonists still know English (from Canada), and only the younger ones know Spanish. But do they know it well enough to read the papers? Nevertheless, as far as periodicals and newspapers are concerned, be they in German or in the language of the land, they do offer at least one possibility in giving some direction to a narrow-mindedness that goes too far.

One good possibility for the Old Colonist to inform himself about life to some extent, assuming he is interested, is offered by the short trips he takes outside the Colony to the city, and occasionally longer journeys to the state capital, or, perhaps, to Monterey or even to Mexico City, where such as are ailing sometimes go for treatment. As Goethe said, the human being learns the most when he travels. But at best the experiences gathered on such trips are of minimal and very often of relative value, since those who are in the position to travel any considerable distance are mostly of the middle or older generations, who for all practical purposes speak no Spanish and can communicate only through interpreters where they are available. Fortunately, German countrymen can be found to serve in this capacity almost anywhere in Mexico, although there are fewer of them today. All in all, however, with respect to enlarging his intellectual vision, the Old Colonist's travels are only a weak means and can bring only limited results.

GOOD BOOKS

And so really only one possibility remains for the Old Colonist who in his maturing years wishes to add to his very modest school education and widen his view of life: books.

As we noted in the previous chapter, during the first years of the Settlement, there was still considerable opposition to the reading of books. "Why does the Mennonite need any book other than the Bible?" the old Colonist was bound to ask. But over the years, a more liberal attitude has become observable.

But in reading, too, there are limitations, and these limitations are increasing because of the nature of the school. Only those who have learned to read well enough can take pleasure, instruction, and profit from a book. But how many of the young people in the Old Colony are still learning enough in their schools, as we have already described them, to be able to read a book with enough ease and fluency to understand its content? It is clear today that among the younger and youngest age groups there are very few.

And what about those who do get enough training so that they can profit from books? For them, too, the possibilities are limited, for when would the hardworking Colonist have leisure time to read? He works from sunup to sunset, and at the end of his long day, he is honestly tired and happy to stretch out his limbs in healthful sleep. If one or another does have a short hour to spare in the evening, he has nothing more than the usual oil lamp by which to read, its dismal light hardly right enough to allow his doing so without eyestrain.

The villages could have been supplied with electricity many years ago, and some of the more progressive Colonists do have small electric generators. On the whole, however, electricity is also considered to be too modern and hence has been consistently refused.

And yet, occasionally one or another Colonist does find a bit of time to read, on Sundays and holidays, on days when spring winds blow so hard that the dust makes field work impossible, or in summer when the soil is soaked by rain and thunderstorms roar across the Settlement, or in winter when a long hoped for snowfall keeps the fields inaccessible for a few days. Then the friend of books finds opportunity to unlock for himself the world beyond the Colony and to acquire for himself things that are useful and interesting to know.

To read does not necessarily mean to become <u>abtruennig</u> [recreant], as many believe, or to become a victim of the "world" and its dangers. The reader can remain firm in his faith, may even be strengthened in his faith because he reads, since with a widened view, he may also see more clearly into matters of his faith.

In connection with this, I would like to call attention to findings of some Canadian Mennonite ministers, which indicate that it is <u>not</u> the least educated who in times of crisis remain most firmly anchored in their religious faith. This fact became obvious, especially during the war, when many thousands of sincere people suffered spiritual conflicts, doubts, and pangs of conscience. The ministers observed their young men very closely in civilian service camps as well as at home and became convinced that the better read these young men were, the more understanding they were able to bring to bear on their spiritual conflicts and the more satisfactorily they were able to cope with them.

Books, <u>good</u> books. Here is a suggestion and a possibility.

Selbst Mexikaner finden sich als Käufer ein, wenn auf einem Mennonitenhofe ein Ausruf stattfindet.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

Inneres der Druckerei von G. J. Rempel, in der seiner Zeit ,,Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" gedruckt wurde.

Foto: W. Schmiedehaus

13. Conclusion

HAS THE SETTLEMENT IN MEXICO BEEN SUCCESSFUL?

In any discussion of the Old Colony, the question naturally arises as to whether its efforts in Mexico have been successful. To this question an encompassing look that does not concern itself with details and secondary issues, but with the colonizing project as a whole, there is only one answer: yes.

The Colony is a fact; the villages, the houses, the livestock, the farm implements are there, and everything that goes along with them, as is the land, more and more of which is brought under cultivation every year and of which there is already too little to satisfy the growing needs of the younger age groups.

And so…the question keeps arising as to where to settle new young farmers. Since even now the amount of land originally purchased is not nearly enough and room is already needed to establish new villages, it is time to find ways to make the further expansion of the Colony possible.

The reason the Colony is so strong and has come to play such a unique role in Mexico is that it is a closed society which as such has become important enough as an economic factor to be a determining element within its surroundings, instead of being determined by them. The latter has often been the case with small splinter groups of colonizing Mennonites in Mexico and is the reason that not a single one of them has been able to prosper. And so it is essential for the Colony to safeguard itself as a closed society and to strive to further its expansion on its own in nearby surroundings.

There have already been repeated offers from other Mexican states, such as Tamaulipas and Oaxaca, whose authorities, having noted the success of the Mennonites in Durango and Chihuahua, would like to settle some of their own lands with these people. But such splinter settlements should be considered only with great caution, for one thing because of reasons already given in Chapter 4, and for another to avoid endangering the Colony's well-tested self-containment. The Durango colony is an informative example of what we mean.

This colony – as is well known – is considerably smaller than the one in Cuauhtemoc, and even though it enjoys favorable conditions – the climate there is just as good as in Cuauhtemoc, and the soil is somewhat better – it has not called a second Cuauhtemoc to life, or, better, has been unable because of its smaller size and lesser importance to force such a city into existence, so that there all the problems having to do with purchasing supplies and marketing products and with the entire economic development become more difficult. The railroad station for the Durango colony, Patos, amounts to very little more today, then it did when the Mennonites first arrived there, whereas the once so insignificant San Antonio de los Arenales has developed into the important trading center the Cuauhtemoc is today.

NO SPLINTER SETTLEMENTS

How inexpedient it is to settle in small groups away from the mother colony was glaringly exemplified in 1944 when a number of families from the Old Colony allowed themselves to be misled and accepted an apparently generous offer of land near Saltillo, the capital of Coahuila. The area in question was known as Pardies Valley among settler groups, of which two that had already attempted to colonize there had failed.

To judge from the topsoil, the land seemed to be good. The seeds sprouted well enough, but the crops did not develop because, as it turned out, the deeper subsoil was impenetrable. The pioneers who had wandered off to this place had just enough time to bury their dead, among them their preacher, before they were forced to fold their tents and return to the mother colony before further losses would have made it impossible to do so. And so the undertaking of this splinter group collapsed in just one year, demonstrating that settling in small groups in Mexico away from the mother colony is in no way to be recommended. This should be brought back to mind when some day in the future resettlement becomes necessary; that is to say, in such an event it should be remembered that if possible, resettlement or new settlements should involve groups as large as possible.

A few words about what has happened economically with the Old Colony. Today the settlers are well off, thanks especially to the high prices farm products commanded during World War II, just as in Canada during World War I. Unfortunately, recent crop failures have allowed a drop of vermouth to fall into the cup of well-being, so to speak. But on the whole, their situation is satisfactory and encouraging. But that is not to say that the Old Colony's success could not have been more lustrous and visible, as many Old Colonists had hoped it would be.

BEING A PIONEER CALLS FOR SACRIFICES

One thing is certain: the Colonists were not spared any learner's fees; the settlement at Cuauhtemoc has come into being at great cost. The strange country with its different climate and seasonal precipitation, the many wrong choices, at first, of crops that were planted, the mistakes made in cultivating them – such things meant losses, quite apart from the means that were lost through bank failures and the general world depression that began at the end of the twenties to take its destructive toll everywhere.

To that were added the early crop failures and the many years of inadequate and uncertain farm prices, which improved only when in more recent years during the development of Cuauhtemoc as a trading and business center, large grain-handling firms established their branch installations here, equipped to handle farm products on a large scale. In short, of losses, unnecessary expenditures, and worries there were certainly enough, and from their point of view, those Colonists who still complain about how bad all that was, about how much the individual lost in the process, are right.

But when was it ever otherwise for colonists in a new land? Did the forefathers who settled in Russia rest on a bed of roses while they had those first icy winters to survive and the Kirghisian nomads stole their last possessions, so that they had to move again and close ranks in their villages?

Of such real hardships as those that were suffered by the early pioneers in Russia, who for a considerable period of time did not even have grain to make flour for bread, and who, as far as the rest

of the world was concerned, might as well have lived on the planet Mars, there has been no talk in this book about the Old Colonists in Mexico.

Nor have we called attention, except for brief intimations, to the great privations and the tremendous costs the Old Colony suffered during its beginnings in Canada, which were much like those in Mexico. Although the Old Colonists did not come to Canada in poverty, many of them, a great any of them, became very poor, not so much because of conditions in Canada, but rather because of all kinds of difficulties connected with the disposal of their properties in Russia, which is said to have involved swindles and gross embezzlements that I have not investigated for this book, since historically they are of secondary importance and have nothing to do with our projected purpose.

And did those who migrated to Paraguay fare any better? One can read up on the founding years of the settlements there in the writings of Dr. Walter Quiring and in numerous accounts in all Mennonite periodicals. The Paraguay settlers did not only sacrifice large sums of money, but also many precious human lives. Illness, pestilence, and death demanded a toll there to which nothing in the Mexican settlement can begin to compare, sacrifices that can never be measured by monetary and economic standards.

To be a pioneer is not a matter of calculating how much one intends to spend or lose in terms of dollars or Marks or pesos or in some other measure. To be a pioneer means to sacrifice, to blaze a trail, point the way and prepare it for others. It requires the pledge of the self, personal well-being, personal interests, even life itself for something that stands above all these things. It means to work for a great goal, a great ideal, for a faith and a future, not a personal future, but the future of those who belong to us, our children, our brothers and sisters, our people. And that is why it is so absurd to speak constantly of losses suffered by the settlement in Mexico in the form of money and goods, as if that is the issue. "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

HOW BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN THE FAITH ARE FARING IN OTHER AMERICAN LANDS

Besides, just how are other brothers and sisters in the faith, our countrymen in the rest of the world, getting along? Are they so much better off than the Old Colonists in Mexico? This question brings disturbing answers. The yearbook put out by the headquarters for German ethnic studies abroad in the spring of 1939 under the title Der Wanderweg der Russlanddeutschen [The Migratory Route of the Russian Germans], was exclusively devoted to Russian Germans the world over. In this report reference was made to a book by Heinz Lehmann, titled Das Deutschtum in Westkanada [Ethnic Germans in West Canada], from which we quote the following:

> Economically the Canadian west, and with it the German farmers from Russia, is still suffering great difficulties because of the crisis that began in 1930. The drop in farm prices, resulting from the collapse of the world economy, and the series of crop failures which began at about the same time (1931 and 33-37) have erased almost all memory of the prosperity the farmer knew during the war and postwar years [World War I], and have thrown the farmer back to where he was in prewar years.

> It is regrettable that since the war [World War I] their youth must attend the elementary school, in which only English is used. Private instruction in the reading and writing of German offered in the Russian-German districts by the clergy or occasionally also by a helpful colonist on Saturdays and Sundays, or else during school vacation is hardly an adequate countermeasure. The greatest danger of the English school is that it produces feelings of inferiority among the German young people when they compare the unpretentious existence of their parents which is closely linked with religion, with the Anglo-Saxon cultural values to which they are introduced in school.

As far as the economic situation described by Mr. Lehmann is concerned, conditions have since changed. One needs to remember that this book was written quite some time before World War II, before the Canadian Germans actually believed in its imminent possibility. In connection with this, I recall something a Halbstadt Mennonite told me. He had visited Canada during the first months of World War II and came back to Mexico greatly disappointed in what he had seen and expressed himself as follows: " I saw a lot of people who once were rich and owned a lot of land and farm machinery. Today many of them reside as tenants on their former farms and work the land for others. And many who once had their own farms now go from place to place in search of work so as to be able to feed their families and themselves by means of a daily wage."

Meanwhile this situation has also changed for the better, but that is how it was at the beginning of World War II. Such things are subject to changing times. At any rate – to come back to the Colonists in Mexico – it may be very much a question of whether they might not have sustained even more losses had they stayed in Canada than they suffered by their move to the distant south. But let us remember that the question of such losses is academic. For the Mennonites in Mexico, success has been the general rule until now. Besides, as has already been pointed out, in the Cuauhtemoc settlement, numerous farmers have never lost a penny. Many of them have made out very well, among them such as started out very poor and have since worked themselves up considerably.

In connection with the yearly convention of the Association of Russian Germans in Stuttgart, the May 1939 edition of the periodical Deutschtum im Ausland [German Ethnicity Abroad], was devoted to Russian Germans and offered a collection of articles on their experiences in all countries in which they have lived in the past and are now living. Following are a few quotations from these articles. The first is from a report out of Brazil, by Wilhelm Nelke:

> The anxious question faced by ethnic Germans from Russia, as well as by the rest of the Germans who are at home in Brazil, is this: will they be strong enough and sure enough of themselves to hold out against the systematic political efforts in chauvinistic governmental circles to do away with their ethnicity? And will they not with the disappearance of the German school that is intended by Brazilian school laws have to surrender bit by bit their natural German heritage as well? The journey of these Germans from Russia who have struck root in Brazil has been long and filled with grief.

From Argentina, Wilhelm Luetge writes:

> Hardly any colonist has gotten ahead economically. Whoever failed to manage carefully has either lost out or has had to go into debt, the repayment of which causes far more than

> just common worries. Not only has the price of cotton dropped so drastically during recent years, that the colonist gains almost nothing from it, but in addition drought, grasshoppers, bad water, and pests have done their part to grind down the colonist. Today the colonist in the western part of the Chaco –as well as those on the edge of the Pampas are earnestly debating whether it still makes sense to wait it out any longer on the land they have made arable and to try a few more times for a harvest of a high enough yield so that debts can be repaid and something can be done about the education of their children, a problem that is particularly acute in the Chaco and has brought many a German family there to the edge of despair. There is no need to explain further after all that has been said that and why the economic situation of the settlers in the hinterlands of the Pampas and in the western part of the Chaco is anything but rosy.

And in conclusion, something written from Paraguay by Friederich Kliewer:

> Even though until now the Germans from Russia have not been especially oppressed in their personal ethnic life, the outlook for the future with regard to developments in South America must, nevertheless, be characterized as not very hopeful. A great danger threatens the German settlers from Russia in the economic sense. It is the reason for the continuing internal migrations. Within the last nine years, many families have moved as many as three and four times, from one settlement to another. It is obvious that no sense of a homeland can develop under such circumstances.

So much for a few descriptions written before World War II dealing with the life of Germans from Russia in various countries of the American continent. And the Mennonites in Mexico thought they had reasons to complain? Among all such reports, of which there are many more, the one on the Germans from Russia who now reside in Mexico may well sound the most confident. At that time, the Institute for Germans Abroad asked me to do the report on the Germans from Russia in Mexico. In my report, I was able, at the time, to sketch in short strokes a picture of the Mennonite settlement in Mexico for the yearbook Der Wanderweg der Russlanddeutschen [The Migratory Route of the Russian Germans] and for the periodical Deutschtum im Ausland [German Ethnicity Abroad], which turned out to be more optimistic than any of the other reports on Germans from Russia residing in American countries. Although I had to report on the great sacrifices demanded at the beginning of the settlement in Mexico, on the many concerns, problems, and difficulties that had hampered the undertaking of colonization, afflicted it, even imperiled it, I was also able to write that all these hindrances had eventually been overcome, and that after sixteen years of hard pioneering work, the Colony stood firmly established; that it was growing and busy at work and that its efforts had succeeded.

THE OLD COLONY IN THE OPINION OF ITS SURROUNDINGS

This book began with the coming of the Mennonites to Mexico in 1922. By today (1980), almost six decades later, a large amount of published materials gives insight into what the Mexicans think of these people who have become their neighbors and fellow citizens.

After so long a time, one would think that the conclusions to which the world that surrounds the Mennonites has come concerning them would be more or less clear and to some extent standardized. But that is not the case; opinions still go off in many directions. Praise and blame, for and against take their turns. Generally today, as in the past, most of the differing perspectives can be traced to bias or lack of basic information. And so, we get a colorful mosaic of all kinds of ideas about the Old Colonists that are expressed over and over until someone prints and publishes them, notions such as the following, singled out from among many and quoted here to serve as illustrations.

In July of 1977, a reporter with the Heraldo of Chihuahua wrote that the Old Colonists were descendants of "Hollanders, Germans, and Russians;" he went on to write, "It seems that they migrated from German lands to Russia and from there to Canada. Here they experienced World War I. They escaped military service on the side of the allies only with great effort. Since they don't wish to partake in any war, they sought a way to migrate to Mexico and were granted the privilege of doing so in 1921."

The following excerpts are taken from an article on the Mennonites that appeared in the same Heraldo a month later: "It was in the French city of Lyon that Petrus Waldus founded the Mennonite sect in the year 1117…homeless because they had been turned out of Germany, Prussia, and Russia, and finally Canada…They have been able, despite these odysseys through which they have had to live, to keep their religious principles for 860 years…"

In an Excelsio, the July number of 1979, we find, "From where does the name Mennonite come? From Menno Simons, who translated the Bible with some changes into German and founded the religious sect…The Mennonite religion is very similar to Catholicism. They believe in the Virgin Mary and the saints. Only the pope they do not recognize. For the worship services, they have a bishop and clergy."

"They are of the opinion that death is no reason for grief. On the contrary, the deceased is borne to the grave accompanied by many children, singing joyous songs. After the interment, the entire group of mourners celebrates the event with an abundant funeral feast."

We can see how "truth and fiction" come together here in the form of unique information.

In 1955, I was visited by Lic. Oscar Flores, who was a senator at one time and later served as governor and is now Mexico's minister of justice. He was accompanied by a younger man, whom he introduced as a writer by the name of Fernando Jordan, who was in the process of writing an extensive work on the state of Chihuahua. Would I please, the senator requested, help Mr. Jordan to some authentic information about the Mennonite colony at Cuauhtemoc. I agreed to do so, and during a number of meetings, I had with Fernando Jordan, we became good friends. I was glad to put at his disposal whatever materials he needed for his chapter on the Mennonite settlement. I made a sincere effort to sketch for him an objective picture of this great undertaking. He took it all in, made his notes, read them to me to ascertain that everything was correct. Even after he left Chihuahua, we remained in contact through correspondence.

The book of this brilliant author, who later committed suicide (out of political despair) appeared in 1956 under the title Chronicle of a Barbaric Land. It was a complete success. Over the years it was to become a standard work on everything worth knowing in the state of Chihuahua, what we refer to as a source book on the country. The book dealt quite thoroughly with the two foreign colonizations

undertaken in Mexico, the American Mormon settlement, beginning in 1886, and the German Mennonite colony, beginning in 1922.

What Fernando Jordan reported in an objective description concerning the Mennonites, based on the information he had gotten from me and found confirmed in Moises T. de la Pena's work titled Chihuahua Economico was generally quite correct. Nor did he hold back any words in his recognition of the great accomplishment of the Old Colonists. But he was not only an intelligent writer, but above all a son of his people and a pledged patriot. As such he was unable to square with his conscience and
convictions that foreign ethnic groups should have been installed where his own people should have been given first consideration. In other words, he was opposed to the colonization undertaken by the Old Colony at Cuauhtemoc, as he made clear in the following quotation from his work:

> An actual contact between, or a blending of Mennonitism and Mexicanism is utterly impossible. For this reason, it has been said that the Mennonite settlement is like a foreign state within our state of Chihuahua. It is incomprehensible that something like this could ever have been approved by our government….
>
> We are concerned here with a group of people who are strange to our country, but to whom have been ceded greater freedoms than to our own countrymen. How can one comprehend or excuse that these foreigners are given all civil rights, but are freed of certain duties incumbent upon native citizens and given special privileges…?
>
> There is no denying that the wealth which the Mennonites produce brings great benefit to the country, and that they have introduced technical and economical farming methods in the state of Chihuahua through which this region has been fundamentally changed and improved. But at the same time, no one can overlook the fact that these are all exclusively material successes. Over and beyond that, their presence stands disturbingly in the way of the social and political integration of our country, Mexico…(Page 371)
>
> For three hundred years they have maintained their civil and religious principles without a fatherland and in complete self-absorption. Every attempt on the part of the countries in which they have settled to change anything about this has failed. Everywhere they have remained as a separate ethnic and racial group, having no connections with the national problems of their host country. The presence of such "privileged" groups, however, who as strangers to a country refuse to affiliate in any way with its culture and essential nature, can only have bad results in the end. (Page 372)

I have always regretted that my unhappy friend, Fernando Jordan, the intelligent author of this great book on the subject of the state of Chihuahua, did not gain a more favorable impression of the Old Colonists of Cuauhtemoc and concluded his observations about them in a negative vein.

An excellent longer treatment of the Mennonites appeared in Propiedad, journal of the Confederacion Nacional de la Pecuena, which dedicated a special edition, No. 10 for October-November 1979, to a detailed explication of the Mennonite settlement in Mexico. We include here a few short, but significant excerpts from this issue.

> Their dedication to the cultivation of their land and to cattle raising has over the years made this region in the state of Chihuahua into an important farm production center of great significance, not only for the area, but for the entire country.
>
> The once tiny and ugly place of San Antonio de las Arenales of 1921 has the diligence of these Mennonites to thank for its development into the flourishing trading center that it has become, as the city of Cuauhtemoc, now the third most important city in the state.
>
> …The entire family makes up the unit of production. The father and mother are managers of the family property. They divide the work among all members of the household for the cultivation of the fields, as well as for the work in the barns and in the house. From age six, children participate in this joint effort.
>
> Their products are not limited to only those of the land, such as corn, beans, oats, wheat, potatoes, apples, and other fruits. They produce as well, hams, bacon, sausages, and not of least importance, butter and cheese [the cheese produced in the Colony is known throughout the country]. Those who have the impression that these are the only things produced here will be, surprised to learn when visiting the Colony how many-sided its activities are.
>
> To a large extent they manufacture their own agricultural equipment, such as tools, machinery, and replacement parts. So, for example, they fabricate in their own shops and factories harrows, cultivators, feed grinding mills, mowing machines, hay turners, threshing machines for beans and corn, large water and oil tanks, sorting tables for apple packing, and many other things, including furniture and other items for their homes of European style, built by themselves, of course….
>
> They are unassuming people, of friendly character and good habits, and they have no ties with any other nation. They live peacefully in our country and harm no one. It is true that some people look askance at them, but only because such people do not know them well enough. In general, they and the Mexicans live side by side as friends today, working together for the peace and progress of the land.
>
> The first Mennonites to settle in our land were indeed foreigners. But the newer generations were born here and think of themselves as Mexicans who are no different from anyone else who lives and works in the state of Chihuahua. Today almost all of them speak Spanish as well as we do.
>
> They perform their civic duties in an exemplary manner. They love Mexico; they love their land, their farms, and their agricultural work. They are respectful in their association with the authorities and are open and friendly to everyone….

The report includes much more of what is praiseworthy on the part of the Colonists, including information on historical, religious, and educational aspects, even though matters relating to these things are not always seen in the right perspective. In its conclusion the report repeats the concessions that were granted the Mennonites through President General Alvaro Obregon in 1921.

The whole report was obviously composed to show the Mennonites in the best possible light. However that may be, this first-hand account belongs to the best of what has been published in Mexico in recent years about the Colonists.

They may well feel satisfaction from such a report, such words from the pages of a leading publication, written recognition of the Colonists' diligence and pioneering spirit.

CONCLUSION

But they are not just words, for the recognition has certainly also expressed itself in deeds.

Let us remember in this respect that during the critical time of struggle over the schools, the government finally resolved that conflict in favor of the Mennonites after all. Let us remember, too, that on the question of religion, the government has shown a tolerance for the Mennonites that is totally incredible; while the flagrant anti-church laws of the Calles regime and the regimes that followed almost completely deprived the land of religion and priests, the churches outside in the Mennonite villages remained, and have since remained intact with all their preachers, who continue to conduct regularly and without interruption year-in and year-out all religious observances according to the customs and practices of their forefathers.

All this may indicate that in places of authority, as well as among the general population, the view has prevailed that the Mennonite settlement is not only of value to the country, but that in all other respects as well, it has come to be at home in the state of Chihuahua.

The picture – I think – is now clear. We have left many things, an endless number of things unsaid. The problem often was to compress the large complex of the many-faceted material in a way to fit it into individual chapters. Much we could touch on only briefly and many things could only be indicated.

And yet, I hope to have captured here what is most important.

Der Verfasser