

# The “Gnadenfelder Gemeindechronik”

From the “Mennonitisches Jahrbuch”

1908 and 1909

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## From the Chronology of the Gnadenfeld Church

### History of the Gnadenfeld Colony and Church

A long time has passed since the founding of our colony Gnadenfeld, so it is reasonable and can be a blessing for us and serve as a memoir for our descendants, to look back and bring to mind our Lord and God's immeasurable grace and compassion which he has shown us and our ancestors thus far. This review will bring to light how much we have neglected or where we have erred so that our village community has not yet become a true "field of grace" (Gnadenfeld). Under God's blessing and with his leading this could strengthen our faith and trust in our covenanting God who has so graciously led us and our forefathers through the years, and in our trials surrounds us with his love and compassion.

As we survey the history of Mennonites on the whole, it becomes clear that since the Reformation during which Menno Simons gathered and organized the scattered "Anabaptists" in Holland and Germany into smaller and larger churches, Mennonites were usually only able to live peacefully and without being attacked in a particular location for a short period of time. Even though one could not deny them full recognition for their quiet moral life, their industriousness and their skill in reclaiming swampy and till then unusable land, it was their confession of faith, abstaining from swearing an oath and abstaining from military service that prevented them from enjoying the same civil rights as other church groups. They were looked upon as a sect to be tolerated only. Thus, it is understandable that our "Mennonite" church history reports so much oppression and so many emigrations.

Since 1531 in Holland when all non Catholics were gruesomely persecuted and killed by fire and sword, many Mennonites and others who could, fled, some to East Friesland, some across the Rhein River, some to the Baltic region, and wherever they found a warm reception, they put down roots whether it was in a city or the open countryside. When Menno Simons was driven out of Cologne in 1546 and set out for the Baltic region, he already found many Anabaptists scattered throughout the Vistula Valley from Thorn to Marienwerder and in the

cities of Danzig, Marienburg, Elbing, Koenigsberg and further into Lithuania. He ministered among them for seven years, together with the leading Gdansk minister, Dirk Philipps. In 1535 a group of Dutch Mennonites probably arrived in Schwetz, a small city on the east shore of the Vistula in West Prussia which belonged to Poland at the time. A Polish nobleman lived on his estate Przechovka, or Kleinsee, near Schwetz. He took a liking to these simple refugees and their plight concerned him. As a result, the whole group followed his invitation and settled on the estate in the Vistula Valley two miles from Schwetz. Their fortune of being able to live out their faith peacefully lasted only several decades because after the death of the first nobleman they were threatened and persecuted in various ways, something that was widespread in the region. However, they lived there for over 200 years until 1764 when the oppression from the estate owner in the realm of the Catholic Church and local officials had become unbearable.

The community sent a three-man delegation to Berlin to ask the King of Prussia, Friedrich II, for permission to immigrate to his state. When these men arrived in Berlin, they had no plan of how to make their request. Without an invitation or introduction to anyone in the king's residence who might have been able to advise them, they were resigned to pace back and forth in front of the palace gates until they were spotted by the king's privy councillor, Franz von Brenkenhoff. He immediately took an interest in these simple strange men wearing long collarless coats fastened with hooks and eyes instead of buttons and wide brimmed hats. A servant ushered them into his private room. After Lord von Brenkenhoff had heard their request, he replied, "If you are of Dutch origin, hopefully you possess the skill of draining swampy riverbeds and creating arable hay and pastureland?" After receiving an affirmative answer to his question, the personable Lord von Brenkenhoff hurried off to see the king, tell him about this Mennonite delegation and present their request. Since Frederick the Great had in the previous year, 1763, gloriously ended the so called "7 Year War", he was now eager and restless to restore healing to his war wounded subjects and land, and uplift his citizens. At this time there were large tracts of land along the Netze and Oder Rivers that were unusable swamp land. The great king had for some time entertained the thought of reclaiming these tracts of land and thereby offering thousands of families the possibility of having a beautiful rustic homestead. As a result, he responded to the Mennonite delegation with great enthusiasm and

interest and after hearing their petition, inquired as to how and under what conditions they would be willing to undertake the reclamation of the swamp land on the right shore of the Netze River. He generously granted them all the conditions and requested supports, and upon the recommendation of the benevolent Lord von Brenkenhoff, they also received special privileges that no other Mennonite community in West or East Prussia had ever enjoyed: religious freedom including complete freedom to live out their faith, the legal acceptance of a simple declaration in lieu of swearing an oath, freedom from military service without any alternative service or a penalty, and the right to maintain and oversee their schools and hire their own teachers. These were the pillars of the agreement that they and their descendants were promised in perpetuity, signed and sealed by the king. The delegation left in high spirits and travelled home full of joy and gratitude. We can only imagine the joy and excitement the news about their experiences would stir up among fellow believers.

In the spring of 1765, 32 families from the Schwetz community, trusting in God's leading, traveled to their new destination, Neumark. It was located between the cities of Driesen and Friedeberg, less than two miles from either city. To the north lay a ridge of hills covered from east to west with a dense forest of trees primarily spruce and fir and forming the boundary of the new settlement. To the south lay a troubling sight, an endless swampy expanse with some grassy patches and the occasional growth of willow trees. This is where the new arrivals of Lord von Brenkenhoff were advised to settle and namely in three villages, two of them named after their generous patron out of gratitude. The larger most westerly village was "Brenkenhofswalde", the smaller village 5 Werst east "Franztal" and the third village not far from the main district town of Driesen received the name "Neu-Dessau".

Now the building of homes for the new arrivals began in earnest. Wood was harvested from the surrounding crown land to build the primarily wooden homes. Not much agriculture could happen because the limited amount of higher land was sandy, allowing only for the planting of some rye for bread and potatoes. That meant that their income source would have to come from cattle breeding, the cultivation of flax and the production and sale of linen.

It is an amazing sight when one surveys the Netze lowland now with its main canal that runs the full length and finally empties into the Netze River in the west. The countless trenches run lengthwise and crosswise all emptying their water into the main canal. The industry and perseverance of those poor settlers who were not discouraged in such a massive task must be recognized and admired. Indeed, they were soon able to enjoy the rich fruits of their effort and hard labour, for soon the drained black soil was covered with the most magnificent carpet of succulent grasses allowing them to raise more cattle. With God's blessing and the protection of the supportive rulers, the community was able to live a peaceful and comfortable life, seemingly apart from the rest of the world, but under these fortunate circumstances only a few were able to assemble significant possessions.

After having set up their homesteads and completed the canal system to drain the lowland, the attention of the community turned to the construction of a separate church. The desire for the latter was justified because inadequate space was a problem during the 13 years the services were held in private homes. However, since they were too poor to build it out of their own resources, the community turned to their benevolent patron in Berlin and shared about their difficult situation, asking for counsel and support. They received a building plan for the church and the assurance from the king that a suitable building location in Brenkenhofswalde next to the cemetery was available at no cost and tax free. The wood for the building was also free and was to come from the surrounding crown land but for help with the other building costs the community was advised to turn to their fellow believers in Holland. This recommendation from the king was seen as a sign from God, so they hurriedly sent both church leaders, the leading pastor Ernst Voth and minister Peter Jantz to churches in Holland to seek contributions for the building of their church. The Lord granted them success and blessed their trip – both men did not return with empty hands and in 1778 the community in Brenkenhofswalde successfully constructed their wooden church and then celebrated the dedication on November 8<sup>th</sup> of that year.

Nine years later, in 1787, following the enthusiastic efforts of their new leading minister Peter Jantz, the Franztal community built a very similar but smaller church. Peter Jantz had been elected leading minister following the death of Rev. Ernst Voth. He had sent a letter to the fellow believers in Hamburg and Holland who assumed the entire building costs and Rev. Johann de Jager of Hamburg sent

back the requested money. In his letter Rev. de Jager also mentioned a Johann Deknatel, pastor from Amsterdam, who was also interested in the building of the church and had sent some contributions.

The community now had two spacious churches in which they could gather in the mornings and afternoons for celebratory and Sunday services. Besides these gatherings, there were meetings in private homes on Sunday evenings and on one other weekday evening. These meetings which did not include a sermon, would begin with a hymn and a prayer, then anyone was free to share an important thought, a question, or an inner scruple which then led to discussion. It goes without saying that these meetings were under the supervision of the leading minister.

After the death of the former leading minister Ernst Voth, the church had elected Rev. Peter Jantz as leading minister. During the unsettled times of the 1790's in France, young men in Prussia were being actively recruited for military service. A young Lutheran by the name of Wilhelm Lange from the Wartebbruch area near Landsburg secretly fled from his birthplace to the Mennonites living in Brenkenhofswalde to avoid conscription and sought protection and acceptance as a member of the church. The members held him in such high regard because of his character and firm Christian understanding that they decided without hesitation to grant his request and celebrated his acceptance as a member of the church. After he had served the Brenkenhofswalde church as a schoolteacher for some time, he was called into the ministry in 1802. Then in 1810 Wilhelm Lange was elected leading minister after the passing of Rev. Peter Jantz. His ministry proved a blessing to the local church and God's blessing followed him in the frequent visits and sermons presented in the West Prussian Mennonite Church. Increasingly people from the neighbouring villages who were members of the Lutheran Church flocked to the services in Brenkenhofswalde eager to hear his sermons about salvation and found here the nourishment for their souls which they could not find in their home churches. Wilhelm's younger brothers, Gottlieb and Johannes Lange, soon followed him. Gottlieb became a member of the Mennonite church in Brenkenhofswalde and Johannes, after completing his military service, settled in Franztal.

During the time of the modern enlightenment in the years beginning in 1812, blatant scepticism increasingly also took hold of the country folk and throughout the Prussian state there arose countless societies with seemingly innocent Christian names but which were largely involved in hostile political activities. The government felt it necessary to ban private gatherings altogether. Only the Christian gatherings which existed under the direction and supervision of the Herrnhuter Brethern Church (Bruedergemeinde) were exempt from the ban. As a result, the Brenkenhofswalde Mennonite Church immediately took the necessary steps to affiliate itself with the Brethern Church so that their assemblies were under their protection and supervision. They never regretted this affiliation with the Brethern Church, in fact it proved most beneficial. Soon one noticed and experienced greater Christian love infused life and greater understanding grounded in the clear teachings of the Holy Scriptures.

The travelling preachers Brother Gottlieb Jahr and Brother Niederschuh were given the responsibility by the Brethern Church to give leadership and supervision to the Christian assemblies in the Brandenburg March. The Brenkenhofswalde Church enjoyed God's richest blessings through the work of these ministers, remnants of which we still experience in our church today. For example, the ministers made a suggestion to the church leadership which then presented it to the church membership about the recognition of children within the church community. In the past nothing was done to recognize the arrival of a small child into the church family. They suggested that it would be more Christ like and reflect what is written in Matthew 19, Mark 10 and Luke 18 that the little children should be presented to the Lord and with the leading minister laying hands on the child, receive the Lord's blessing. This would be an opportunity to encourage parents to consider Christian education for their children including discipline and the fear of God. The church immediately accepted and introduced this worthy procedure because it followed Jesus' direction. Furthermore, these two ministers initiated and encouraged an active vibrant mission work.

Ultimately, this connection with the Brethern Church proved a blessing for the Brenkenhofswalde Mennonite Church school. One could rightfully place blame on the Mennonites generally, including those in West and East Prussia, for lacking any interest in a thorough Mennonite education for their children. This too happened in the Brenkenhofswalde community where neglect in their usual

Christian striving meant that the children's wholesome development and education were all but forgotten. There were times when no Mennonite school even existed and the parents sent their children to the Lutheran schools in the neighbouring villages of Alt-Carbe, Vorbruch and Netzbruch. Finally, the church came to the realization that it would be more beneficial in every aspect both for them and their children to have their own school.

As a result, after a long interruption, such a school was begun under the direction of a church member, Peter Jantz. He conducted school in a room in his house while still farming on the side. This arrangement continued unopposed for several years until unexpectedly in the summer of 1831 the Superintendent and school inspector from Driesen paid a visit to the school. They conducted a careful investigation and discovered that teacher Jantz did not possess the necessary education and training for the job. Peter Jantz was forbidden from continuing to conduct school classes and since the church could not replace him with a qualified teacher, the school was temporarily closed. In this difficult situation the church immediately sent a petition to the government in Frankfurt an der Oder appealing on the basis of the privileges they had received years ago to run their own schools, and requesting that they be allowed to retain their Mennonite teacher in their school. A reply was soon received indicating that the government was not inclined to overrule the previously agreed to rights and freedoms with the Brenkenhofswalde Mennonite Church. However, the teacher of their school would be required to pass the teacher's exam in the Teacher's College and have proof thereof with a diploma. All of their schools would be subject to school inspections from now on.

What may have felt like the end of the road on this issue or an absence of good advice, was actually God intervening with his grace and wisdom before being asked. It happened as it usually does, when in the Lord's time he interjects an improvement into his church. This improvement was made possible through a couple of young men from the community who several years ago through self study, unusual talent and persistent diligence under the most difficult life situations attained a high level of education and successfully passed the teacher's exam. As hard-working teachers, they had landed teaching positions but neither was procurable for the small Brenkenhofswalde school.



One of them, Tobias Voth, after teaching several years in a city school in Prussia, was recruited by the chairman of the agricultural association in Molotschna in South Russia to teach at a school in the Orloff colony and was currently working there with success. The other young man, Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, who was not yet a member of the Mennonite church, was the son of the aforementioned Johannes Lange and nephew of the leading minister Wilhelm Lange and had after passing the teaching exam, taught in the village school in Montau not far from Graudenz but was soon transferred to a teaching position in a city school in Graudenz. He was loved and highly regarded by the parents of his students and his superiors, had a good relationship with the Mennonite churches in Culm, as well as the Graudenz lowlands, and embraced their spiritual well-being with heart and soul. For these reasons he probably would have continued in his position because here was the opportunity to associate with educated colleagues and the college teacher Voelkerling and thereby broaden his knowledge.

However, God had other plans for his life, namely to place him in a better environment among the Mennonite community. It happened in the following manner. In 1827 God planted into the heart of minister David Epp who worked hard for the kingdom of God and was from the Mennonite church in Heubuden in the Marienburger Werder, a plan to form an association to establish and support a Mennonite teacher's college. Its students would receive good Christian instruction and an education in the other school subjects which was more thorough and complete than what was offered in the elementary schools. Soon the association was formed, and ready to carry out the necessary steps of the plan.

There was a recognition that the main requirement was a teacher and director who was hard working, skilled and had a well-rounded Christian education. Unanimous in its decision, the association offered the job to Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, the city teacher from Graudenz, who willingly accepted. Shortly thereafter they received the requested permission from the government to establish the school. The Rodloffershufen piece of land about 3 werst from Marienburg was purchased immediately and as soon as November 1827 they were able with God's gracious presence, to celebrate the opening of the institution and begin the school year.

Students came from far and wide, from the countryside and the cities of Danzig, Marienburg, and Elbing. A 14 year-old boy even came from the Culm lowlands, somewhat late around Christmas time. God's authority and grace were an unmistakable part of this school and although it became known as the "self righteous" school by those that were hostile towards it because of its Christian focus, that did not overshadow the great success of the first exams in August 1828. The vast majority of the students were recognized and admired by many for their achievement.

Devout pastors and pastoral candidates such as the Lutheran pastors Dr. Kniewel and Kossak, the Reform Reverend Mombili, as well as the candidates Blech Senior, Blech Junior, Schnase and Hermann visited frequently and preached Christian sermons which had the effect of revitalizing and encouraging the students and their friends. The aforementioned boy from the Culm lowland, Heinrich Franz, grew academically and spiritually at this institution with its decidedly Christian atmosphere. After completing 3 years of teacher training, he returned to his home not far from the market-town of Neuteich in the Marienburger Werder where he worked as a tutor for three years. Then he received a call from his birthplace to take over the leadership of the local school. Well meaning friends and his beloved teacher counseled him, now almost 18 years old, to return home in the summer of 1830 in order to take the Graudenz College teacher exam. He spent two days writing the exam when the administrative advisor from Marienwerder disclosed that writing the exam was pointless because as a member of a religious sect that was barely tolerated, he would be unable to receive a permanent teaching position even if his diploma reflected that he was a hardworking teacher. With that news all his beautiful hopes for the future were dashed and dejectedly he notified his dear teacher about his hopeless predicament. On the recommendation of his guardians he would be forced to apprentice with a master tailor because all possibilities of getting a teaching position had just been taken away. Thanks to God's gracious counsel it did not come to pass, for even though the Sunday when he was to start with the master tailor was close at hand, the plan of his guardian was never fulfilled. A timely invitation arrived from his patron in Marienburg to come see him as soon as possible because several parents in the Werder requested him to tutor their children. In September 1830 he became the happy teacher of a small group of

Mennonite children and since his work location was only 1 ½ miles from Marienburg, he frequently visited the places that became important to him during his three year stay at the school and which had influenced his life's calling. This young man was happy in his situation and now had no greater desire than to perfect his skills as a teacher. Occasionally however, the thought occurred to him that there was little hope that he could function as a teacher in Prussia and would only be able to work as a tutor all his life. There was probably a better opportunity for him among the fellow believers who immigrated to Molotschna in Russia and so he wrote to his uncle who had immigrated to South Russia a few years ago. He asked him to look for a teaching position among the Mennonites in the Molotschna. Soon he received a friendly reply assuring him that currently the schools were in sad shape because there was a shortage of hardworking teachers. Such teachers would never be without work or a suitable job.

However, immigration to Russia had recently been forbidden by the Russian Emperor and therefore the Prussian government was no longer issuing passes to emigrate. Even this ray of hope disappointed, so there was no other option but to continue with the job as tutor. When all human solutions have been exhausted and you can no longer see or recognize the path ahead, that is when God is ready to provide guidance and help, prepare a path and clear the way that you are to go if you only trust him with your concern.

Near the end of summer in 1831, the Brenkenhofswalde Mennonite Church sent two ministers, brothers Wilhelm and Benjamin Lange, sons of Gottlieb Lange to Rodloffershufen near Marienburg to follow up on the aforementioned resolution about their school. They wanted to ask head teacher Friedrich Wilhelm Lange if he could recommend a Mennonite young man as a teacher for their school. There was absolutely no choice in young teachers because at that time among all Westprussian Mennonites only one young man was known of who had devoted himself entirely to a teaching career and that young man was the tutor Heinrich Franz. The ministers travelled home after the situation was discussed with him and a commitment received to take over the leadership for the school, should he be successful and pass the upcoming teacher exam. Since the teacher exams were only offered once a year, the Brenkenhofswalde community had to be satisfied with the present school arrangements until September of the following year.

During the last week in June 1832 their prospective teacher was able to complete the prescribed exam at the Teachers' College in Jenkau near Danzig. After a successful completion and the receipt of his diploma from the government in Gdansk (Danzig), Heinrich travelled to his birthplace to bid farewell to his mother and family. Then in August he travelled on to Brenkenhofswalde, his new destination, together with Mennonite ministers and his teacher Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, to participate in a general conference. In the meantime, the current teacher Peter Jantz had unsuccessfully attempted the teacher exam, gone over to the Lutheran church, completed a four-week remedial course in their college and passed the exam.

Peter Jantz arrived in Brenkenhofswalde, encountered the Mennonite teachers, and expressed the hope that the government would hire him to be the teacher for the whole community, not just the Lutheran children but also the Mennonite children as it had been before, and thus not needing to open a Mennonite school. The Mennonite community did not allow themselves to get discouraged by that suggestion. They worked harder than ever to assemble the required school equipment so they could open the school as soon as possible. It was a pleasure to see how hard people worked to lend a hand: someone supplied a teacher's desk and chair, others made the school desks and benches and on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1832 the school celebrated its opening in the church.

At the beginning the school was small, only 10 students, including 5 Lutheran children from Franztal. The teacher discovered that the older students were behind and lacked knowledge but their parents' great interest in the school clearly influenced the children to develop an enthusiastic work ethic leading to promotions from one grade to a next, a source of great pride and joy for the teacher. Naturally the children soon made visible progress in all school subjects and that couldn't remain hidden. As a result, within a few weeks every last desk was taken in the school room, and a small table had to be moved into the hallway for two girls who refused to be turned away. Less than half the students were Mennonite.

The last fact was used by the four Lutheran teachers from Brenkenhofswalde, Alt-Carbe, Vorbruch and Netzbruch to slander the Mennonite school in front of the school board and propose that Mennonite teachers be forbidden to teach

Lutheran children in a Mennonite school. Eventually this prohibition was granted. The Mennonite teacher outlined the situation to his Lutheran students and explained that from now on they would not be allowed to attend his school or he would have to pay a 5 Thaler penalty. The Lutheran parents defiantly declared that they would continue sending their children to him and assume all the responsibilities or penalties that followed.

In this difficult situation the Mennonite teacher, Heinrich Franz, wrote to the senior school board in Frankfurt an der Oder and requested an impartial school visit to his school as well as the four schools of the teachers that slandered him and complained about him in front of the school board. Until that could happen, he wished to be allowed to continue teaching his Lutheran students and not be accused of disobedience. Soon the rector Zierenberg from Friedeberg was tasked with the job of inspecting the schools in the Driesen circle and provide a report of his observations.

After the school inspection the Mennonite school was never challenged again and was allowed to accept the Lutheran children entrusted to them. From now on the church particularly as it relates to its school had a good relationship with the school board and the school was held in high esteem so that uncertainty and worries were no longer an issue. Their interest in the school grew as the progress made by the children at the school increased. In return the teacher received an increase in his salary equivalent to half of the fees paid by the Lutheran students.

## **From the Chronology of the Gnadenfeld Church (Part 2)**

As comfortable and idyllic as the situations were in many aspects of life in the Brenkenhofswalde Church, the leaders, nevertheless, recognized an increasingly apparent threat facing their church. The threat arose from the fact that the church had become too small and was too distant from its west Prussian fellow believers, to be able to remain a homogeneous community for very much longer. Several families had died out or immigrated to Poland and South Russia resulting in several former Mennonite homesteads in Brenkenhofswalde and Franztal now coming into the possession of Lutheran families. The time would soon come for the church to address a serious question: to allow for mixed marriages within the membership or to emigrate to a region where larger groups of Mennonite churches already existed.

It was at this time that the church leadership, near the end of 1831, unexpectedly received a communication from the Minister of the Interior. It indicated that their former entire Declaration of Privileges would hence forth be invalid, but that the Brenkenhofswalde Mennonite Church would be free to choose one of three options to replace the agreement. The first option was to accept compulsory military service. Secondly, to discharge the debt of military service, they could choose to pay an annual income tax in the amount of five percent, with the restriction that the Mennonites would no longer be able to purchase and possess land other than that which they presently owned. The third option was to emigrate.

After the church submitted a written petition to His Majesty King Friedrich Wilhelm III and received his personal reply: "My dear children, as much as I would gladly help, nevertheless I cannot," – the church immediately decided to bid farewell to their beloved fatherland and precious homesteads where the Lord, during their sixty-seven year sojourn, had shown them immeasurable grace and goodness, and set their sight on immigrating to southern Russia. The community made it known in the Driesen district that they wished to sell their land and homesteads as soon as possible, and some had already done so, when they received a reply to a written inquiry from the Russian Counsel General in Danzig, with the information that His Majesty the Emperor of Russia had forbidden the

immigration, and therefore, he could not grant the necessary immigration papers. Only God, the Lord could rescue them from this dilemma.

The church needed to decide what they should do now. They agreed to prepare a petition for His Majesty Nicholas I, the Emperor of Russia, describing the dilemma of the community and appealing for mercy in granting the community of forty families the permission to settle among their fellow believers in the Molotschna, in the Government District of Taurida in South Russia and as an act of grace, allow them to emigrate. This happened in the summer of 1832, and a number of uneventful weeks followed within the community. However, with the end of the year approaching and no answer from Petersburg, many people who had already sold their homes and were renting, lost their patience, and at the same time their desire to immigrate to southern Russia. After the Russian troops had successfully quelled the Polish Revolution, they speculated that the properties belonging to the Polish nobility, which had been confiscated by the Russian government, would soon be made available for sale under favourable conditions. They also calculated that it would be easier to move there, because it was not as far. One could take along the horses and cattle, the farm equipment, and the most necessary furniture and kitchen utensils, and not be forced to sell these at ridiculously low prices. Such convincing arguments were of no use, and more talk was not helpful, as they first needed to receive the emperor's answer from Petersburg. In the end only three church members remained, who still had the courage and trust in God's gracious leading.

In the end these members could not stop a three-man delegation from being sent to Poland in the spring of 1833, to gather information about the land and select a suitable property. These scouts returned with the most glowing descriptions, in particular about three estates not far from Ostrolenka, resulting in frequent deliberations about how one should proceed in this matter. It pleased the three church members that even after a number of attempts, it was proving difficult to reach a decision about immigrating to Poland. Finally, a meeting was scheduled where each male church member was to appear, and with their personal signature indicate their choice, to immigrate to Poland or continue to wait for an uncertain response from the emperor. In the meantime, several additional families had sold their homesteads and with the passing weeks the situation

appeared to become more urgent, requiring a firm decision to be made. Man's great distress is God's opportunity.

That is exactly what happened here. The day for decision making had arrived; all church members were assembled. Leading minister Wilhelm Lange placed a letter with a large emperor's seal on the table and addressed the gathering in a solemn, deeply moving tone: "Brothers, this letter from His Majesty, the Emperor of Russia, arrived yesterday, and I hope that after reading the letter to you, not one person among us will have any doubt about the path our loving God has prepared for us." He read the emperor's letter slowly and carefully indicating that the forty families of the Brenkenhofswalde Mennonite Church had graciously received the emperor's permission to settle among their fellow believers in the Molotschna in southern Russia. The meeting was brought to a close with the offering of a joyous prayer of thanksgiving.

Since it was already late in the year, the emigration was postponed to the summer of 1834. Many arrangements had to be made, many things had to be cleared up, and that would take some time. Also, the last homesteads still needed to be sold. A new question now arose for the church, namely: the permission to immigrate to South Russia was granted for forty families and now the church was only twenty and several families strong. Perhaps it was their responsibility to accept into membership families from the West Prussian churches who wished to emigrate, and thereby increase their numbers to forty. This proposal was unanimously supported by the congregation. However, only two Mennonite families applied for membership, namely: Abraham Rempel from Koldau near Marienburg, and the widow Timon Franz with her five grown children from the Schoensee Church in the Culm lowland, who then were also gladly accepted into membership.

A Lutheran gentleman by the name of Fenske who attended worship services also requested membership. Initially he was not granted membership because the leading minister and the congregants believed that the acceptance of Lutheran Christians into the Mennonite church was not permitted under the law. Fenske was not willing to accept this setback but instead asked the accountant Steinike from Driesen whether the transfer of membership from the Lutheran church to the Mennonite church was truly forbidden by law. He received the answer:



“Thanks to God, we are very fortunate to live in a country where there are no moral constraints. Listen to what the law has to say about that!” Then he proceeded to read for him the appropriate paragraphs from the book of statutes, sent an amiable greeting to the Reverend Wilhelm Lange and suggested the minister visit him personally to gain understanding in this matter. After this transpired and J. Fenske was accepted into membership without any opposition, the group number only reached a total of thirty. Therefore several Lutheran families who had been faithfully attending worship services at the church, took advantage of this opportunity, and thus, ten Lutheran families and two single gentlemen were accepted into church membership, namely: Johann Lange and his son-in-law Johann Preuss, Gottfried Rabe, Johann Rabsch, Hermann Lenzmann, Johann Gloeckler, Michael Kant, Christian Dosso, Christian Herfort, Gottlieb Strauss, and the two single men, Karl Bruesso and Karl Klatt.

Meanwhile the necessary preparations for emigration were attended to with zeal: transport wagons were procured, the emigration passes and consent from the Prussian government and the immigration passports from the Russian emperor’s Counsel General in Danzig were obtained, at which time they were also required to pay 800 Rubles per family to the Consulate, in the form of a guarantee bond. This money would be returned to them by the Molotschna Mennonite District Council after settling in Russia. The latter was certainly a difficult requirement for all the poor families, where in some cases the money they received from the sale of their possessions hardly covered their travel expenses. The well to do church members intervened and paid the bond for these families. Both sides were in full agreement on the assumption that the poor families would not be allowed to settle in South Russia without repaying the 800 Rubles to their benefactors. The two sides, to be sure, had agreed to an unsanctioned arrangement because they were unfamiliar with the settlement regulations in Russia, and thus a loving God availed himself of the ignorance of his children to help several poor families acquire possessions and achieve a level of prosperity which they could never have dreamed of.

Finally, the families who had sold their homes were finished with all the preparations, so that in July 1834 the emigration could begin. A few families had left two weeks earlier to travel to West Prussia, to bid farewell to their Christian brothers and sisters living there; the others followed a more direct route through

Poland, where they joined the advance group at the Mennonite church in Haidberg on the Vistula River (Weichsel). This is where the Prince of Darkness was able to sow seeds of dissension among this peaceable, loving and united community, resulting in a fall out among the leadership of the group. This unfortunate incident would best not even be mentioned, or disappear into oblivion, had it not had so many long-term consequences for the spiritual well-being of the church.

The elderly leading minister, Wilhelm Lange, had, since the death of his wife on April 21, 1832, continued to maintain his household with the help of a middle-aged Lutheran woman named Juliane Lange as housekeeper. Until the emigration, this spinster had been able to gain the community's love and respect through her ingratiating personality, her impeccable job as housekeeper, and her regular participation in all devotional gatherings in the church. When she observed how so many Lutheran families were being accepted into membership in the Mennonite church, she, upon a recommendation from the leading minister, requested membership in the church, shortly before the emigration. The church community, however, rejected her application because they suspected that she may have been motivated by self-interest in making this request. Nevertheless, leading minister Wilhelm Lange had taken her along thus far, and once again presented her membership request to the group of migrants.

His closest relatives, with the exception of Johannes Lange and his son-in-law Joh. Preuss, flat out objected, reasoning that Juliane, as a Lutheran woman, would still be able to continue to look after the elderly gentleman's household. The more important reason for their denial of her membership request was that the relatives firmly believed that Juliane, once she became a member of the church, would with great determination pursue becoming his wife and ultimately the sole beneficiary of his sizable estate. (The events that followed gave evidence that their suspicions would in fact become reality.) A vote conducted by the entire group of migrants, again resulted in the majority rejecting her request for church membership. This matter was now set aside, but not its sad consequences.

The group of migrants split into two smaller groups and continued their journey through Warsaw, one directed by the leading minister, the other led by one of the lay ministers. Anyone who would have had the opportunity to closely observe

these migrating travellers, would have unquestionably recognized that here were Christian communities who, even on this journey, were not ashamed of the Gospel. Each morning before departing and each evening before bedding down, a short Bible passage was read, as well as one or more stanzas of a hymn sung, followed by a prayer spoken by the group leader. However, Sunday was the day of rest, and they began the morning with their usual church service. Thus, the long arduous journey continued, quite successfully under God's protection, despite the usual travelling unpleasanties and the unwelcome several days delay in Warsaw, where their passports were examined. One of the parties had another short delay to bury the wife of Gottfried Lange, who died shortly before their arrival in Michalin, a burial which took place in the local Mennonite cemetery.

On October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1834 the larger group arrived in Alexanderwohl and a few days later the second group followed. They were then taken to the more eastwardly located villages of Friedensdorf, Rudnerweide, Grossweide, Pastwa and Steinbach where they would find quarters for the winter. But alas! How dismal was the sight in some villages at that time. There had been a total crop failure in 1833 and the depressing sights were very obvious in the villages of Alexanderwohl, Friedensdorf or Margenau, as it appeared that these had suffered the most. One could see many buildings without roofs, because they were forced to use the straw roofs to feed the cattle so they would not starve. The straw was finely chopped in order to use it for cattle feed. This sight proved very discouraging for many a migrant, because they too would have to suffer under those conditions, and pay an exorbitantly high price for grain for their bread and cattle feed, even though there had been an average harvest in the summer of 1834.

The migrant families under the direction of leading minister W. Lange found quarters in Alexanderwohl and Friedensdorf; the second group found quarters in the other aforementioned villages.

The following spring the story was circulating everywhere, about how the housekeeper of the leading minister W. Lange had been accepted into membership in the Alexanderwohl Church on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, and become his wife on April 23<sup>rd</sup>. The tension in the relationship between the leading minister and his two nephews, ministers Wilhelm and Benjamin Lange, increased following this event, understandable by anyone who knows the human heart, even though

this reaction may not be Christ-like. On the contrary, even though the scattered church members regretted the sad situation regarding their church leader, they had no plans to leave and join a neighbouring church, rather they used every opportunity to try to reconcile and make peace between the extended family members of their leading minister. Even in other churches one sometimes experiences disappointment when it comes to one's expectations. However, the leading minister as well as both ministers Wilhelm and Benjamin Lange were often invited to preach in the churches in Rudnerweide, Alexanderwohl, Ohrloff and Schoensee.

### The Settlement

In the fall of 1834 with favourable weather and under the direction of the district council and agricultural association, the village plan and a suitable settlement location were determined. The settlers were advised to choose the beautiful area east of the Konteniusfeld border with its rolling hills and arable prairie. The area from the Behemtschukrak all the way to the Juschanlee, from the Konteniusfeld border to the west, was approximately five werst wide. The settlers quickly agreed with this recommendation. However, when it came to finalizing the settlement location, and the district council in agreement with the agricultural association offered them a location one and a half werst from the Konteniusfeld border, along the road from Rudnerweide to Alexanderwohl, on a plateau, many settlers did not want to have anything to do with this location, and asserted their desire, as was the case with all other villages, to settle along a grassland river.

Finally, with much persuasion, the wish of the leadership of the migrants was accommodated and immediately the settlement plan, as it had been proposed by the district council and the agricultural association, was measured out, divided up and marked with plough furrows. The layout was for a 2 werst long rectangular piece of land, the longer sides ran north and south, the adjoining ends east and west, and was divided into 40 regular homesteads, 4 business lots and 80 half sized lots. The regular homesteads formed two rows of twenty lots separated by a four fathom (24 feet) wide grassy path way marked by plough furrows. There was enough distance between homesteads to allow for ample sized gardens. The rather wide path was named "der Kirchensteig", or the Church Path, and rows of elm trees were soon planted along each side of the path. The half sized lots were

to be located behind the regular sized homesteads, two behind each regular homestead, and separated by a relatively wide street. The plan called for the planting of a treed area beyond the half-sized lots, and surrounding the village. A “Mittelgasse” or Middle Street was to be located precisely in the middle of the village, and run perpendicular to the two long wide streets and the “Kirchensteig”, dividing the village into an eastern and western half, and into four equal quarters from the perspective of the “Kirchensteig”. The northerly direction of the Middle Street was to lead to the all too distant cemetery. At the focal point of the village, that is, where the “Kirchensteig” and the “Mittelgasse” crossed, the plan designated land for the building of a village school on the eastern side and an equal allotment for the church on the western side, so that they would be facing each other on the “Kirchensteig”. The land required for this plan resulted in a considerable loss of land designated for the gardens of the four adjoining regular homesteads along the “Mittelgasse”. Therefore, the width of those properties was increased to compensate for this loss and at the same time the location determined for the business lots. These four lots were situated across the long wide streets, in line with the half-sized lots, and on either side of the “Mittelgasse”. Indeed, when one compares this village plan to other existing villages, one must confess that it is one of the most attractive ones.

This creation still needed a name and since the settlers were given the freedom to decide, “Gnadenfeld” quickly became their name of choice. The village wasn’t a “Tal” or valley, but a noticeable plateau and lush prairie grass land visible from a great distance in all directions and it came to be known as Gnadenfeld for several reasons. The name was to be, for the present as well as future settlers, a memorial to the founding of the village, which had thankfully happened solely because of God’s grace and the mercy shown by the Russian emperor. Furthermore, the name would arouse in the settlers the desire and prayers that this new home would always remain for the community a place where they could in all aspects of life, experience the blessings and manifestations of God’s grace in full measure. Lastly, the name would be a reminder to the settlers of their responsibility to willingly submit themselves to the moving of God’s grace and more fully grow into his grace.

After the permit for the settlement arrived at the district council on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1835 from the Guardianship Committee in Odessa, the council directed them to

immediately proceed with the assignment of the regular homestead lots. First of all, a decision needed to be made about how many persons and who were entitled to a regular homestead in the settlement. An advisement from the district council as well as the agricultural association indicated: "According to law, every name for whom was paid the 800 Ruble guarantee bond to the consulate in Danzig must settle, willing or not." During the process, the four homesteads along the "Mittelgasse" were assigned to the leading minister and the three lay ministers Wilhelm and Benjamin Lange and Abraham Retzlaff. Now the necessary preparations for settlement could be made. To begin with, a community well was dug so that water was easily available during seeding time, the building of the temporary sod homes and the setting up of all the essential necessities of a new settlement.

Most settlers possessed no money except the 800 Ruble guarantee bond which would be returned to them only after they had erected the framework and rafters of their home. The settlement process, particularly for them, was fraught with many challenges, much worry, effort, and hard labour. The walls of the homes and businesses were built of crude white bricks made from the so-called white earth brought in from excavations along the Behemtschukrak combined with the fine gravel from the Juschanlee. Only Wilhelm Lange junior built his home and barn out of baked bricks. The leading minister purchased a wooden house and barn, had it dismantled and erected on his lot, thereby finishing ahead of all others. The more well-to-do settlers alone successfully completed their home, barn and stable by late fall. During the first year of the settlement, the weaker settlers built either a home with a temporary barn or a barn with temporary living quarters and kitchen. Even so, some would not have survived the winter cold, had it not been for the brotherly love within the community. Those who were already living in their new homes eagerly came to their rescue, so that even the weakest among them had a roof over their head and a home to move into.

In September of the initial year, the last families of the Brenkenhofswalde Church arrived at the settlement, leaving behind only a few church members who did not wish to emigrate and ended up joining the Lutheran church there. By 1836 these latest arrivals were well on their way to settling in their new homes and at the same time the construction of the school was begun using the funds from the sale of their churches in Prussia, on loan from the church community until such a time

as when the church could be built. Until then the school was also to be used for the worship services on Sunday, religious gatherings and for special celebrations.

After the second migration, only three homestead lots remained vacant, but these too had settlers by 1840. That year essentially brought to a close the settlement process, however, as the fifty-year comprehensive history of our village would show, development and construction within the village continued. Unquestionably, the community had now overcome their greatest challenges according to the saying: "All beginnings are difficult". However, in praise and honour of our Lord, mention must be made that the beginning would have been so much more difficult for the settlers had it not been for God's ever present and visible grace, compassion and faithfulness. The Lord granted them good health and joy in all their undertakings and protection from all injuries during the settlement process. Once when a small, nearly two-year-old boy fell into an approximately twenty-foot deep well dugout, he was able to be rescued unharmed and the child suffered no further ill effects.

In order to restore the courage and uplift the spirits of the settlers even more, the Lord blessed them with abundant crops from their fields and overflowing baskets of produce from their gardens. When observing such rich blessings, one is instinctively led to join in with Jakob, the patriarch, who was likewise richly blessed, in his prayer: "Lord, our God, we are not worthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown us, your servants!" Even the fainthearted souls had to concede that their life was good and certainly well worth the effort that was required to establish a home here.