

A Small Chronicle of the Mennonites in the Molotschna from the establishment of the colony until my 80th year

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Translated by Elfriede Rempel and edited by Glenn H. Penner. Mennonite Heritage Archives (2021).



Foreword: Among the papers that came into my possession after the death of my father, I found the following brief history of the Mennonites in the Molotschna, including its initial development from the time the colony was established. My father himself recorded this history which contains much worthwhile information. It will certainly be of interest to many people and provide a glimpse into the lives of our ancestors. Therefore, to fulfill the wish of our bishop, the publisher of the Mennonite Yearbook, I was prepared to put to print the chronicles of my dear long departed father. “Test everything, and hold on to the good”. (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

[son] Abraham Braun [1851-1908]
(Teacher in Gnadenfeld, Molotschna)

I, who was born in Russia, raised by Mennonite parents, baptized into the Mennonite church and brotherhood, would like to, in my advancing years, record this brief history for the younger generation. The major portion of the content comes from my personal experiences and the gathered experiences of our ancestors and is not meant to give offense to or insult anyone. This record is meant to be impartial, without prejudging on the issues as they are known to me.

When I think back to my childhood, I must say that the separation between the Mennonites and other divergent thinking German speaking people went too far; in many respects they looked upon the latter as descendants of their persecutors from the time of the martyrs. Based on the books about martyrs, which many families still possessed at that time, it was commonly believed that they dealt only with Mennonite martyrs. Some even went so far as to refuse to be welcoming towards people from other religious confessions. I remember this well from the immigration of the “steppe colonists”, as the Germans on the other side of the Molotschna were referred to at that time. When they arrived, they stayed with our Mennonites for the winter, although I cannot say whether that happened as a result of an ordinance from higher authorities or because of the generous hospitality of the Mennonites.

I clearly remember my parents also hosting one such family. These German colonists, having mostly arrived in Russia as very destitute families, could not all immediately settle on their assigned land. Among them were educated men, who for several years, chose to become employed as school teachers in the Mennonite communities. One of these educators taught in Altona, where I attended school, and he provided me with a good grounding in reading and writing. Through these experiences and the rising number of Mennonite immigrants from various regions in Prussia, the Mennonites here became increasingly liberal and open-minded although many remained strictly orthodox.

The first bishop was Jakob Enns. He settled in Tiegenhagen and was a man of little ceremony and few pleasantries. [2] Since he was not well-to-do, he also worked in his tailor’s shop. The first *Oberschulze* [District Mayor] was Klaas Wiens [3] from Altona, my father’s closest neighbour. He came to Russia, a well-to-do visionary, and claimed two *Feuerstellen* [farmsteads], immediately farmed with his own stable of horses, constructed two clay brick cottages for his herders and Russian workers, and in short, he ran his operation like a bourgeois gentleman. These first Mennonite immigrants were under the direction of the Guardianship Committee for Foreign Settlers in Ekaterinoslav; thereafter they came under the Settlement Guardians Committee in Odessa. In compliance with an additional ordinance from the President of the committee, Senator [*Staatsrat*] Kontenius [4], the settlers in each village elected *Schulze* [mayor] and one *Oberschulze* to oversee all the mayors. As indicated, Klaas Wiens was elected the first *Oberschulze*. He was driven and strove to help the Mennonites make progress in farming and land cultivation; however, he was very headstrong.

The President of the committee, Senator von Kontenius, at that time had wanted the Mennonites in each colony to plant a grove of acacia and mulberry trees, as he was already envisioning a future in sericulture [silk farming]. *Oberschulze* Wiens immediately sprang into action; the President’s wish became his command. He planted the first mulberry trees in his own garden. After that he also persuaded the Altona village community to set aside a piece of land of approximately four dessiatines [13.5 acres] located at the end of the village for the exclusive planting of mulberry trees. Indeed, the trees were planted, but the care of the area was not maintained. While he lived in Altona, he operated a successful silkworm breeding program. I

have vivid memories of watching the spinning activity of the silkworms and seeing their cocoons at the Wiens farm.

Wien's strong convictions soon led to conflict with the community, as well as with the bishop. He became rebellious, sold everything he couldn't take with him, and moved to the open, uncultivated steppe where Greeks and Tartars grazed their large herds of horses. He deconstructed his house in Altona which was made entirely of wood, and transported the materials to the homestead location within the second settlement he had founded. The settlement was named Steinbach [5]. This separation from the other Mennonites appeared to be a daring move, and the great distance from Altona felt like it was "beyond Russia's borders", leading many to speculate that this would lead to Wien's downfall. However, this turned out not to be the case. In 1825 when Emperor Alexander I travelled through the region, he, in an act of preferential treatment, gifted Steinbach [estate] with several hundred dessiatines of land.

The Mennonites who had immigrated in 1819, settled on the reserve crown land in 1820, joining the existing colonies. Together they formed a civic government [*Gebietsamt*] and a ministerial body [*Kirchenkonvent*]. Till then all sins and misdeeds, outside of criminal acts, were punished by a church ban. With the emergence of pluralistic faith communities, [6] the question arose of whether the church ban was adequate punishment for all serious transgressions, since there were those who had been banned for many years and had never been accepted back into church membership. Furthermore, some wondered whether a Mennonite who followed an "only-the-sword-of-the-Spirit" lifestyle could accept a position in the civic government.

Because of the differing views regarding these questions, a small group of Mennonites who had Rev. Klaas Reimer as their leader at the helm, distanced themselves from the others. Before his departure from the "large" church, this man Reimer wanted to convince Bishop Enns that he was not leaving "Babel" without just cause. One example: He had already visited Bishop Jakob Enns many times with the intention of converting him. One day Enns was sitting at the tailor's work table, when his wife said: "He is here again." This time Reimer had brought a witness with him. He came into the room and said: "Good day," followed by the question, "Is it true, Uncle Jakob, that you beat your servant?" Enns answered: "Go to the barn and ask him!" They went to the barn: "Toms, is it true that Enns beat you?" "Yes", responded the servant who was also a fellow member in Enns' church, "but I also richly deserved the beating." The investigators left and did not return again.

This seceding group assumed an unusual position in relation to their church discipline. Their religious observances included eliminating all elements of elegance, rejecting the use of tobacco and Brandy, etc. They were not allowed to wear suits, only overcoats, or read any books other than the Bible, the church hymn book, the catechism, Menno's writings, Martyrs' Mirror and "Die Wandelnde Seele" [The Wandering Soul]. The numbers in this so-called *Kleingemeinde*, as it was being referred to, were quickly increasing. However, within this community no misdemeanors were recognized as worthy of punishment by the worldly government. Oberschulze Abraham Toews once told me that he had been in his position for 14 years and in all that time no individual from the *Kleingemeinde* had taken legal action or been punished for other

transgressions by the Gebietsamt. Their unusual stance was tempered by the intervention of the chairman [of the Agricultural Association], Johann Cornies, [7] who gained the support of a certain minister Heinrich Balzer from the Kleingemeinde, a wise and open-minded man. He understood how to convince the members of the Kleingemeinde that the chairman Johann Cornies only had the best in mind for our people. It is unfortunate that this man didn't live longer; he died during the best years. In a manner of speaking, the Kleingemeinde has disappeared from Russia and is now found in North America.

At the time when the Kleingemeinde had its beginnings, there arose discord within the large church, leading to a separation. The discord arose when one of the itinerant missionaries from our colony was granted permission to preach in the Orloff church. Who granted that permission I cannot say, perhaps it was Johann Cornies. That was the first invitation to the Mennonites to become engaged in foreign missions and the proclamation of the gospel. Most Mennonites had no understanding of mission work and the role of the missionary. When they discovered that he was Lutheran and had worked for the salvation of pagans, the church and the pulpit, in their eyes, had become so defiled that a peace-loving Mennonite minister would never want to preach in that church again.

At this time, the large church had two houses of worship, which were built with community funds. The larger group, according to their thinking, did not want to have their church service in the same building at the same time as the smaller group who had the bishop within its fold. Therefore, the latter suggested they should take turns having their services in the church buildings, one Sunday for one group and the next Sunday for the other group. The larger group alone wanted to hear nothing about that option. They left the churches, held their church services in large barns, elected their own minister and Jakob Warkentin as bishop who led all church functions in the barn. I myself was baptized in one of those services. The hostility towards the congregation led by Warkentin began increasing. Some were so infuriated that they wished ill upon chairman Johann Cornies who they believed was responsible for this situation and should be sent to Siberia. The hatred was so great that they felt they had the grounds to file a complaint against Johann Cornies with the welfare committee. With that in hand, two men, Bishop Warkentin and his brother-in-law Johann Klaassen who was the Oberschulze at the time, travelled to Odessa and presented their complaint to the committee which was under the direction of a newly appointed president, Senator v. Hahn. [8] Upon their return, they broadcast that Senator v. Hahn would soon be travelling through the Mennonite colonies to investigate the disputes here and bring the guilty to justice, to which they added that it may not go well for chairman Johann Cornies should he be exiled to Siberia.

The senator arrived soon thereafter. This was his first trip to the colony and Cornies had not yet made his acquaintance. The leaders of all the parties: the chairman, Johann Cornies, Bishop Warkentin and the observers were invited to investigate the disputes and bring a resolution to the conflict. It was revealed that the church led by Warkentin was too large and the senator ordered the church to be divided into three groups, Bishop Jakob Warkentin to be relieved of his position, and to elect three church elders to replace him. This led to a big uproar among the Mennonites;

some maintained that Senator Hahn had committed a criminal act and had little faith in a worldly judge having the power to remove a Christian elder from his position, an elder revered by all church members. This process led to the higher authorities granting Johann Cornies alone, the responsibility for the administration of justice over all Mennonites in the Molotschna area. This responsibility even extended to the Russian and Nogais people living in the surrounding areas. His opponents among the Mennonites were primarily the members of the three divided church groups.

When the Oberschulze Abraham Toews, who was a supporter of Cornies, died, he had to be replaced. The votes from the three churches, as per prior agreement amongst themselves, supported a man who had previously been a Oberschulze and who Johann Cornies could not under any circumstances allow to assume this position. He immediately gave an order for a revote and this man received the majority of the votes again.

In order to give the welfare committee a full picture of the slate of candidates, Cornies had to describe the course of events for the election and the candidate receiving the majority of the votes. Senator Hahn responded that the election for Oberschulze must be held immediately for the third time and accompanied it with a strong admonition. Senator Hahn spoke of “Mennonite scheming” and warned those who had voted for the man during the second round, that they would not be allowed to hold any office in the future. The mayors of the gathered community were instructed to promptly read and explain this message before proceeding to the election for the Oberschulze. In Grossweide there were eight people who had not obeyed Cornies’ order. They were so angry and responded by ranting and pounding their fists on the table. In order to maintain as much control as possible in the heated environment, the mayor took no notice of the disruption.

At that time the start had already been made on a tree planting project, for which Johann Cornies had the major responsibility, keeping in mind the wish of Mr. Kontenius, expressed during the time of the first Oberschulze Wiens and in keeping with the Mennonite obligation within the “Privilegium” [Charter of Privileges] they received. The vast majority of the Mennonites did not believe in this endeavour, that trees would ever thrive on our high-altitude steppes. Since they saw Cornies as the originator of this forced labour [*“Frondiensten”*], as they described this work, their dislike of his orders did not decrease. Cornies also did have his friends and in just about every colony there were those who were not totally supportive of him, but took on the role of a “good little child” to flatter him and it was they who reported all who defied his orders. The latter were subsequently punished by Cornies with assigned work at the community sheep farm. Using the church ban as punishment was stopped almost entirely during Cornies’ time; it was only used in situations involving sins of the flesh. An example of the misuse of the church ban punishment follows. At a group work project [*“Scharwerk”*] where Russian and Mennonite workers were sent to do spade work, a Mennonite got into a quarrel with a Russian. The former struck the Russian with the spade, something that did not please him. The mayor of the village in which this confrontation took place, didn’t know which punishment he should assign the Mennonite offender because this involved a Russian. The mayor was advised by the chairman

that he should choose someone to administer a certain number of lashes [“*Rutenhiebe*”] to the offender. The mayor returned home with this advice and ordered one of his fellow church members to administer the prescribed number of lashes to the man who struck the Russian. After the punishment had been meted out, the bishop was notified that a member from his church had struck another brother in the church. The bishop presented this to the church and do you know what happened? The church convicted the man who had acted on the order given by the mayor, punishing him with a church ban. In order for this misuse of the ban not to become a habit, an example had to be set. Chairman Cornies presented the matter to the committee and recommended the bishop be banned from the community. This was carried out soon thereafter.

In the meantime, the Driesen Mennonite Church from Prussia, under the leadership of church elder Wilhelm Lange, had immigrated to the Molotschna area and had also settled on another section of crown land in the village of Gnadenfeld. This community had different customs and spoke a different dialect. Apart from this, they were more tolerant than the previous Mennonite settlers and responded to the orders from Mr. Cornies with fondness and affection. However, this community was not particular enough for Cornies in the matter of church discipline; allowing small sins that were punished by the other Mennonites to slip by.

Johann Cornies continued to work as long as he lived. He was the one, among the Mennonites, who reformed the educational system. He once said: “It is time that the Mennonites take off their fur pants [“*pelzhosen*”].” The colonies were ordered to build new schools according to his plan. He examined the teachers himself to ensure they had sufficient knowledge, etc. He endeavored to introduce improvements in all aspects of the school system. Regrettably, he passed away all too soon in 1848. After his death his enemies heaved a great sigh of relief; they maintained that they were now free of all forced labour.

Till now the Mennonites in Russia were looked upon as a small state within the larger country, so to speak. In comparison to other settlers, they enjoyed great privileges. However, there were always disputes amongst themselves and frequent complaints made to the higher authorities, occasionally going as far as St. Petersburg. The indigenous population begrudged them their entitlements and so 12 years ago they lost their *Privilegium* when compulsory military service in Russia was introduced. A special concession was made with the crown that instead of having to take up arms in the war, they were allowed to render an alternate service in the forestry. Despite their strong resistance to this during Cornies’ time, they were now expected to do it willingly. As a result of schisms, several groups have emerged in more recent times who differ in their theories of faith. They still wish to be Mennonites, and one cannot take that away from them, in spite of the decline among us being great enough so that even the best churches can’t say: Come to us, we are the original Mennonites; although their lifestyle does not give evidence of that. I believe that the Mennonites here in Russia are in luck, for they, based on the folklore of the Farmer’s Almanac, are on equal terms with the indigenous people; for the present administration of justice in Russia above all still holds the German people in high regard. The Mennonites could take advantage of that if they wanted to return to what they promised when they received the charter of privileges (*Privilegium*), namely to be a quiet, hard working people. An example of the esteem

in which the German people are held: During his reign, the most blessed Emperor Alexander asked a certain General Jewdokimow how he could demonstrate his gratefulness to the General? He is said to have answered: "Eternal Majesty, turn me into a German!" If the Russian people six or seven decades ago valued being German so much and had these thoughts deeply embedded in their psyche, then the Mennonites should have engaged in mission work to a greater extent. However, there was often bad blood between them in their land disputes, even between the most peace loving among them.

The land disputes began when the crown land given to the Mennonites became densely populated. The increasing numbers of Mennonites, including older people, explained it this way: The crown land was meant for all the Mennonites and their children and grandchildren. Therefore, after the land is settled, we should be entitled to ask for our fair share of it. Either we request that the presently settled land be divided equally among the number of families or that the landowners purchase land for the landless. It is easy to see that the first demand was not practical. They were ready, though, to purchase land; the younger settlers, however, were to pay for it, something not everyone agreed to.

After negotiations, they were able to, in 1870, purchase a tract of land in the Kherson Oblast where twelve colonies were established. [9] This settlement somewhat deflated the land disputes and there followed twelve years of relative peace. Suddenly the old conflict reared its head and the landless settlers demanded that the farmland be redistributed among all settlers etc. This time the landless settlers resorted to sheer fraud. A corrupt man from Poland by the name of Streich, arrived in our colonies and introduced himself to the landless settlers as an eminent person from the court in Petersburg. He gave the impression that he had a mandate from the higher authorities to visit the Mennonite colonies in the Molotschna anonymously, in order to discover what kind of rights the landless had, to lay claim to land. Naturally this cheat stuck with the landless settlers because they believed him and gave him money. In the meantime, a commission was sent out again to buy land which they found in the Bachmut region [10]. A section of land was purchased and developed into ten colonies. The anonymous man who had extorted considerable money from the landless and turned out to be a nihilist, was arrested and received a deserved prison term.

May our loving God grant our people a quiet, hard working spirit which they possessed before immigration! Otherwise, we are not worthy of the grace and favour extolled by the emperor.

Abraham Braun
Grossweide, Molotschna

Footnotes by Glenn Penner:

1. Abraham Braun was born sometime around 1806 in Halbstadt, Molotschna colony, the son of immigrants from West Prussia Bernhard and Margaretha Braun. His father died when he was about 1 or 2 years old and his mother remarried to Johann Friesen of Altona, Molotschna. Abraham lived in Altona until at least 1835. Here he married Helena Schmidt sometime in the early 1830s. By 1839 he was a landowner at #19 Grossweide. He was still in that location in 1862. At the time of writing his memoirs he was 80 years old (ca. 1886). His death date is unknown. He is said to have been a teacher, but no evidence has been found. There may be some confusion with his son, also named Abraham, who was known to be a teacher.

2. For more information on Jacob Ens See:

[https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Enns,_Jakob_\(1768-1818\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Enns,_Jakob_(1768-1818))

3. See: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Wiens,_Klaas_Klaas_\(1768-1820\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Wiens,_Klaas_Klaas_(1768-1820))

4. See: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Kontenius,_Samuel_\(1749-1830\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Kontenius,_Samuel_(1749-1830))

5. Steinbach was the name of an estate, not a village. See:

[https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Steinbach_\(Zaporizhia_Oblast,_Ukraine\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Steinbach_(Zaporizhia_Oblast,_Ukraine))

6. Note that most new immigrants of this period were Frisian or Old Flemish. Up until then the Molotschna colony was a Flemish Mennonite settlement.

7. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Cornies,_Johann_\(1789-1848\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Cornies,_Johann_(1789-1848))

8. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Hahn,_Eduard_von_\(19th_century\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Hahn,_Eduard_von_(19th_century))

9. This was likely the Sagradovka settlement founded in 1872.

10. This would likely have been the Memrik settlement started in 1885