

## **Contentius Report on the Chortitza Colony - 1798**

**Source: St. Petersburg Archives (RGIA) fond 383, Opis 29, Delo 161**

Litt: C

### **Description of the Economy and Rural Housekeeping of the Mennonites, Numbering 228 Families in the First Group, 118 in the last, 346 Families Total, Settled in the Villages Schoenwiese and Kronsgarten around the place Chortitza in the Novorossiyskaya Guberniya, Composed as per the 1<sup>st</sup> Paragraph of the Instructions Given to Me**

#### *On their Departure to the Novorossian Guberniya*

In the year 1789, at the invitation of G. Trappe authorized by the Highest decree, after the preliminary declaration of the privileges and advantages Most Gracefully installed by the blessed and eternally remembered Sovereign Empress Catherine II (attached here under letter A), the Mennonites departed from Western Prussia and the lowlands around Danzig to resettle into the Novorossian Guberniya. [pg. 48] First, 228 families, then, at various times between 1793 and 1796, 118 families, making it 346 Mennonite families total.

#### *On the Place Where They Settled and the Amount of Land Provided to that End*

The 228 Mennonite families, who arrived in 1789, were given the place Chortitza located in the Novorossian uyezd 80 versts away from the guberniya capital on the right bank of the Dnieper river, as well as an adjacent island of the same name 8 versts long and 4 versts across, containing 22 687 desyatinas of useful land:

fields	– 21 460
hay fields	– 987
forest and bushes	– 240
Total	– 22 687 desyatinas

#### *On the Number of Villages Built by Them, Their Location and Names*

The aforementioned 228 Mennonite families have founded eight villages not far from each other, named as following:

1. Chortitza
2. Rosenthal
3. Einlage
4. Kronsweide
5. Schoenhorst
6. Neuendorf
7. Neuenburg
8. “Kampe” on Chortitza Island

[pg. 49] The Chortitza village numbering 52 households and Rosenthal numbering 45 are located by the river Chortitza, which feeds into the Dnieper river 3 versts away from there and dries up in summer.

The Einlage village numbering 48 households and Kronsweide numbering 34 are located on the right bank of the Dnieper on a low, sandy place.

The villages Schoenhorst, numbering 40 households, Neuendorf, 60, and Neuenburg, 25, are located in the steppe, on lowlands by a dry ridge, where they hold water with dams to water the livestock. When this water dries up, they water the livestock from wells, which they dig, if location allows, at stables, and get water from these wells by specially built water pumps.

The village Kampe on Chortitza Island, numbering 12 households, stands at the best and most advantageous location: here the lowlands called Plavni [pg. 50] provide it with abundant hay and firewood.

Concerning the usefulness the whole Chortitza ridge, there is a disadvantage that there is an abundance of high places and a lack of low ones. On such altitudes crop grows poorly, and in the hot times pastures turn dry and meagre, water dries up, and the few low places, called here “Balkas” [gully] do not provide enough hay for the winter.

*On the Arrival of the 118 Families, 86 out of whom Settled in Chortitza, into this Guberniya*

From 1793 to 1796 the aforementioned 118 families went out to settle in the Novorossiyskaya guberniya and were sending elected people from their community to examine the lands designated to them. Finally, three years later, as per the Government’s orders, 86 families were to settle in the Chortitza place among the 228 old families, as there still was [pg. 51] extra 7867 desyatinas of land, and [this decision] served to the significant harm of the whole colony\*. The other 32 families have settled [pg. 52] in other uyezds and have founded the villages Sschoenwiese in Pavlogradskiy uyezd and Krons Garten in Novomoskovskiy.

The village Schoenwiese, numbering 17 households, is located in the Pavlogradskiy uyezd 15 versts away from Chortitza, by the river Moskovka, which feeds into the Dnieper from the left bank 3 versts from there. There [pg. 53] bad fields are compensated by outstanding gardens and hay fields, as per each proprietor there is 30 to 40 German two horse carts of hay, which means that pastoral farming can be usefully conducted here and the local residents can improve their state earlier than those in Chortitza.

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\* [pg. 51] It is my opinion that this area of land high above the water table cannot feed the designated number of farmers due to the lack of low places. Because of how dry is the land, because of the lack of moisture within it, because of the common here lack of rain, and because of the long summer droughts, it is not uncommon to see farmers plough the land in vain and in vain sow the fields. Except for the rainy years, no grain grows here but rye and millet, as opposed to what may be seen in lower lands. Here some low and moist lands reward a hard working farmer with the same plenty, as the loss, with which high and dry lands ruin him. The rest [pg. 52] of this Description will demonstrate that even the number of 228 families settled in Khortitsa is too large for them to ever flourish despite all the hard work. The additional 86 families have worsened the existing scarcity. Now that the areas of land, which can be put to use, are even more crowded, not a single Mennonite should expect to see any real use from pastoral farming, since with the larger number of proprietors everyone’s share from the hay fields has decreased by a third, whereas it was already insufficient.

The Krons Garten village, numbering 15 families, is located in the Novomoskovskiy uyezd, 15 versts away from Novorossiysk, and 1 ½ versts from the Josephsthal colony, by the Kilchin river. All the fifteen families residing here live in two old state-owned houses. Even though they have received 500 rubles each for starting their households and 120 logs each for building houses and outbuildings, they do not wish and cannot start building in the place designated for their settlement, because their livestock [pg. 54] cannot go to the watering place, which was owned by the late Collegiate registrar Otchenashka\* as it was under dispute. He owned a plot of land 44 desyatinas, bordering on one side with the Kilchin river. This sole plot of land along the Kilchin river owned by Otchenashka covers the whole watering place, which is why the Krons Garten village cannot settle there with any convenience. The current owner of that plot does not let livestock from the Krons Garten village to the watering place, and the Mennonites have to take their livestock for watering to the Josephsthal colony, repaying them for it with grass. Director Brigontsi presented these circumstances to the local Civil Governor, who directed the Lower Local Court [Nizhniy Zemskiy Sud] to solve this, [pg. 55], which was not yet done.

This village is surrounded by good fields and ample hayfields; for the purpose of gardens the land is also quite useful. With the current harvest of rye and spring crops they hope to get 8 to 10 grains [per grain sown]. They still do not have even a half of the land they are owed according to the number of the families, and various measures have already been taken towards adding to their land the missing 561 desyatinas 270 sazhen.

#### *On the Quality of Soil in the Chortitza Area*

Across almost the entire ridge the soil consists of light chernozem 1 to 2 feet deep, and the layer closest to it contains dry, yellow, hard, sandy rather than clayey soil. At greater depth, mainly when digging wells, granite can also be found. So it can be determined that the qualities of this soil are [pg. 56] that it is light, dry, porous, and in places contains saltpetre. Moisture is found at the depth of 12 feet. During the rainy years, which happen here quite rarely, the land is fruitful; during the dry ones the harvest of rye is mediocre, while the spring crops, garden vegetables, young trees, and grasses mainly wither.

#### *On the Mennonite Agriculture, and are They Hard Working*

During the first years after their arrival here the Mennonites cultivated their fields following the German way, using German plough and a cultivation tool that they brought with them from their previous place of residence, called *Gactnu* [?; Kontenius gives German word]; sometimes they even fertilized the fields with manure. However, they have learned from experience that fertilizing local soil this way does not improve it and that making soil soft here does more harm than good, since this makes it worse at preserving moisture, [pg. 57] and strong winds, which are common here, can more easily blow away the soil along with the seeds it contains once this soil is crumbled into dust. Having found their agricultural experience incompatible with the properties of the local soil, they have started imitating their neighbours the Malorossians, and now they cultivate the land just like them, except that the Mennonites use horses to plough. They do this partly because with the horses the work goes faster, and partly to

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\* [pg. 54] Who got it from merchant Ostroukhov, as shown in the attached land plan.

put to use in the field works the mares, of which each proprietor keeps as many as he can afford. When it comes to agriculture, Mennonites are fairly hard workers, although some of them have lost their motivation, because their labour receives almost no reward due to the local climate.

### *On the Sowing of Crops*

Mennonites primarily sow rye, then winter wheat, and out of spring crops: oat, [pg. 58] wheat, barley, peas, flax, buckwheat, lentils, millet, melons, and watermelons.

### *On the Harvest of Crops*

To determine with reasonable certainty the harvest of the field crops, I have demanded from each village of the Mennonite colony the yearly harvest data throughout the eight year period of their stay here. After comparing the amount of grain sown and the harvest, I have found the following average harvests over the eight year period:

rye – 2<sup>nd</sup> grain  
millet – 4<sup>th</sup>  
lentils – 4<sup>th</sup>

spring rye      marginally above the amount sown  
spring wheat   marginally above the amount sown

winter wheat   marginally below the amount sown  
barley           marginally above the amount sown  
oat                marginally above the amount sown  
buckwheat       marginally above the amount sown

Doubting the truth of this data I have most thoroughly gathered information and found out that on average the harvest of rye produces the 3<sup>rd</sup> grain.

As far as the spring crops, the received data deserve more trust, as I have examined the crops in all of the local villages, [pg. 59] and have found that half of them are withered. More than that, I was informed by trustworthy people that the last years have seen the same poor harvests as now, and there is no doubt that people in the Chortitza area harvest from the spring crops just the amount of grain they have sown or slightly more than that\*

### *On the Quality of Pastures and their Inability to Support Livestock in Winter*

Pastures in this area are good, and livestock quickly becomes fat, except that among other grasses here grows in great numbers one fairly harmful grass called “Kr[y]mskaya,” which often scratches the tongues of livestock with its hard spikes. Sometimes a diligent proprietor would avert this evil, and it is often exterminated. In spring the pastures are plentiful, but as the

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\* [pg. 59] These poor harvests of spring crops are particular to the Khortitsa colony, as not far from here, up the Dnieper, the harvests are very good. The reason for this difference can be probably attributed to the different properties of the soil or the higher altitude of this area.

heat comes in June, [pg. 60] the grass in high places stops growing and dries up due to the lack of rain. Late fall it starts to grow again. In moist low places and in valleys grasses keep growing all the way till winter. In winter there is a great shortage of hay for cattle and horses. The best lowlands and valleys are taken up by the villages, and the little remaining amount of lowlands cannot produce enough hay to satisfy their needs.

### *On Pastoral Farming*

With all the effort they put into agriculture, the Mennonites pay most attention to pastoral farming, in which they exercise with all the more diligence, since from agriculture they cannot expect much use. However, due to the aforementioned difficulties with feeding livestock in winter, they are unable to expand this branch of farming according to their wish and custom. The main obstacle [pg. 61] for their industry is that this land naturally lacks low places, where grasses could grow throughout the whole summer and provide plenty of hay for the winter. Before the Mennonites settled here, this land was populated by about 50 Malorossian [Ukrainian] families, who avoided high dry places, used only lowlands convenient for agriculture and pastoral farming, and enjoyed the plenty. Now, when the best valleys are occupied by villages, when 314 families are constrained living in one place with the number of people and livestock disproportionate to that of crops and hay, when most of their livestock died of hunger during the hard winter of 1795, one can clearly see, why despite all their diligence they cannot achieve a better state of affairs. To aid pastoral farming many proprietors of means brought along from their former fatherland [pg. 62] good mares and studs, bulls and cows, but in the first years after their arrival they have lost a significant number of their livestock to theft, namely 545 horses and 704 cattle. Furthermore, they have lost a large part of the rest of foreign livestock in the hard winter of 1795, so that little of it now remains. Despite these woeful circumstances, recently some of them went to foreign lands to bring in good livestock for the improvement of the local breed: according to them, a cow from their fatherland produces two or three times as much milk, as a local one. No less effort they put into breeding horses, keeping a number of mares and studs required for that. Occasionally, they managed to sell their horses for 100 rubles or even more. Though they still keep sheep in small numbers, they would see great use in increasing it and do so, provided that they have plenty of pastures. Last year there were 650 sheep in the whole colony; now the numbers have declined. [pg. 63]

### *On the Products of Pastoral Farming*

The products of their pastoral farming are butter and cheese similar to those from Holland and various smoked beef and ham, which are not much worse than the foreign product. Also, through the use of foreign breeds, they try to breed good horses and cattle.

### *On Gardens*

First, the Mennonites planted in their gardens various foreign garden vegetables, which grow poorly here and cannot spread. They also plant fruit trees, willow, and black poplar. When the gardens are located in low places, where moisture may collect, these trees can grow; on the high places the opposite can be seen. Keen gardeners, who are not uncommon among Mennonites, used various methods for cultivating fruit trees, willow, and black poplar, and even

if some trees in high places bloomed for a few years, afterwards [pg. 64] they would still wither. Only cherries grow well here.

Besides the usual edible roots, they plant kohlrabi, parsnips, various beans, and sweet pea. During rainy years greens also grow, but they wither in the dry ones.

#### *Where They Sell Their Products and is it Convenient for Them*

The Mennonites harvest so little in the fields and gardens that sometimes it is not enough to feed themselves, all the less for sale. To Novorossiysk, Kherson and Kharkov they take butter, cheese, smoked beef, and lamb for sale; this spring some of them went to Crimea. Their products do not sell well in Novorossiysk due to the proximity of the Yamburgskaya and Novomoskovskaya colonies, which supply the aforementioned products in plenty. In Kherson they sold their products for great profit [pg. 65] during the arrival of the foreign vessels, but in their absence they always had to either sell their products at a loss, or to trade them for other goods, which they also could not sell out without a loss. Since they have suffered loss rather than gained anything from selling cheese and butter in various places, this common way of feeding oneself cannot be of much use to them either. They are sure that they would be able to benefit more from selling their products, if goods were stored in Kherson, Odessa, or Crimea, and if trade and commerce in one of these seaside towns increased and became more advantageous than in the others. Otherwise, they cannot undertake such a costly venture.

#### *On Success of their Housing*

Mennonites' finished residential houses with outbuildings are notably high and spacious, [pg. 66] they are strong and convenient, built partly out of sawed wood, partly out of timber framing ["fachwerk"] and infill. A home and a light, large, clean room by it with two small chambers at its sides, under which the cellar is located, share the roof with the stables, sties, a shed, and a barn. For rural houses these homes look respectable. However, building a good house costs, with all the carpentry, woodworking, metal work, and other expenses, more than 700 rubles; more than 400 for an average house, and more than 200 for a poor one.

Number of finished houses with outbuildings in the colony – 58  
unfinished houses without outbuildings – 198  
completely unstable houses – 52\*

As can be seen from the note attached under the section B.

[pg. 67] Building of houses still continues in the colony every year. Proprietors of means have built their homes with their own money that they have brought from their fatherland. The poorer ones have been building more or less as the Most Highly provided aid was issued to them in greater or smaller payments. Should the colony receive the rest of the expected money promised by the Most Highly approved conditions, all the buildings will probably be soon completed.

#### *On Mennonite Trades*

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1 [pg. 66] without any houses - 38



Besides agriculture, pastoral farming, making cheese, and butter, and smoked beef, they do not practice any trades or crafts, which could be used in commerce. There are millers, woodworkers, carpenters, [pg. 68] metal workers, tailors, and weavers among them, the latter making good fabric and handkerchiefs for the colony's internal use.

### *On Their Income*

The Mennonites only use their agricultural products, which can rarely satisfy their own needs, to feed themselves. Very scarcely can they feed themselves with their own produce for the whole year; more often they have to buy some, and thus agriculture brings them no profit. Only pastoral farming is profitable, although not greatly, as they have to partly buy fodder for horses and cattle. The sale of cheese and butter rarely adds to their income, since, as shown above, they more often sell at a loss, than at a profit. Though some wealthy Mennonites [pg. 69] may enjoy good profits, it is only those, who brought from their fatherland sums of 2[000]-3000 rubles; many still receive from their fatherland aid, inheritance, etc. Such proprietors are able to purchase in advance oat and hay for the upkeep of livestock in the winter, and may enjoy proportional returns. On the other hand, those who solely live off of their own produce are happy if they simply manage to cover their basic needs with their income and not acquire any debts.

### *On Their Morals and Domestic Life*

Domestic life of virtuous Mennonites, which make up most of them, is marked in every way by order and cleanliness, as [pg. 70] their moral life is by sobriety and honesty, except for a certain part, which cannot boast these qualities. There are also several depraved people, of whom I shall not yet write to the Expedition, as the elders of their community still hope that they will right their ways. Their normal diet consists of dairy products and other simple food. They are moderate in consumption of strong alcoholic drinks and diligent in housekeeping. They perform the work according to their position diligently, although not as quickly or nimbly as Russians.

### *On the Number of Mills*

There are six good windmills in the Chortitza colony built with the Mennonite community's funds, and one [pg. 71] floating on the boats: five built the German way and one the Dutch way. This number is fully sufficient for the internal use of the colony; some of the mills are rented out by the community, and the others are sold to millers.

According to the villages, the cost of building six mills, including the materials and the workers' pay, reaches 5050 rubles. Furthermore, one additional windmill was built by the villages Schoenwiese and Kronsgarten each. These two mills together with the other six bring the costs up to 6050 rubles.

To build these mills necessary for the colony [pg. 72] by their common efforts the Mennonites had to use the money given to them by the Treasury as an aid in establishing their households. This led to many of them not being able to complete their houses, which is why I was asked to present to the Expedition their most humble request to kindly issue them from the Treasury, as a replacement for the materials used and money spent, instead of oak and six good stones sufficient for the building of two Dutch style mills as per the 9<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the Most

Highly approved terms, an equivalent amount of money. I have the honour to relate this request to the Expedition in more detail in a special report dated on the same day. [pg. 73]

#### On the Number of Drinking Houses in the Chortitza Colony, on Their Income and Where it Goes

Each year 599 rubles 50 kopeikas are collected as rent from the eight drinking houses built in the Chortitza colony with the common funds. These money are used as upkeep for the shepherds, and whatever remains – to buy bulls for the herds.

#### *On River Crossings*

There are two crossings across the Dnieper river by the colony. One is near the Einlage village, also known as Kichkas, at the large post road. The other is by the Chortitza island, only for connection with it. The first one is rented out for 690 rubles. These money are used for the upkeep of one scribe [colony secretary], various needs of the local police, and for repair and maintenance of the [pg. 74] ferry, wonderfully built in the German style, that goes along a cable.

#### *On Houses of Prayer and Schools*

There are two houses of prayer in the Chortitza colony: one in Chortitza and the other in Kronsweide. In winter the community hires room for a school.

This description of the state of the 346 Mennonite families settled in the Novorossiyskaya guberniya shows that the 314 families settled in Chortitza **are unlikely to ever flourish despite all of their hard work** [my emphasis]. [pg. 75] The eight year experience further confirms my opinion that agriculture rarely provides them with required amount of produce, and insufficient hay fields cannot supply livestock with enough fodder for the winter. Though they possess vast lands, little of this land is useful. With great sorrow, all of them speak as one, and I join them in this opinion, saying that as long as their 314 families live constrained in high and waterless places, trying to provide for themselves there, [pg. 76] they will not be able to achieve a better state, not to mention returning to the Treasury the money spent on them. Or, if a greater half of them could be resettled to a different, more convenient, rich in water and balkas [gullies], state owned land, they would soon become useful subjects of their new fatherland.

Court Councillor Samuil Kontenius

#11  
Josephsthal  
July 8<sup>th</sup>  
1798